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長月達平
The author
Tappei Nagatsuki
ILLUSTRATION 大塚真一郎
Shinichirou
Otsuka
Re:ゼロ
Re: Life in a different world from zero
から始める異世界生活

Re:Zero Kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu (WN)

Arc 4: The Everlasting Covenant

by Nagatsuki Tappei

Info: Novel Updates

Chapter 01 [The Place They Returned To]

The grey gloom of the sky mirrored the state of Subaru's heart.

In front of Crusch's mansion, six dragon carriages lined up in a row. Those that fled from the Roswaal domain, the villagers of Arlam(or so the place was called) were all loaded up. Only the final special carriage was reserved for Subaru and Emilia.

The road is long, so unlike the way here, they won't be riding with the children. Also because there is a mountain of things he has to say to Emilia, Subaru prearranged it so they could be alone.

[I will become rather lonely]

Silently gazing at the dragon carriages, Subaru heard a voice from behind him.

Turning to see, it was Crusch looking at him. Her long green hair caressed by the misty wind, she closed her eyes, and reached her hand into Subaru's hair, mussing it up.

[Subaru: It's not like anything will happen if I stay here, I'd feel bad to just keep sponging on your hospitality —to be honest, I really should be taking some time to recover, but it can't be helped]

Opening and closing his hands, Subaru thought about the state of his health, and smiled awkwardly. Back then, it was to recover his health that he came to Crusch's mansion in the first place. Roswaal had a hand in sending him here, and

it still annoys him to see that Clown's wishes fulfilled so perfectly. As a matter of principle, even if he fulfills any of that guy's wishes, it should be by continually stomping it.

[Crusch: Natsuki Subaru-sama, you know you're welcome to sponge here as long as you like… even though it's hard to say that out loud]

[Subaru: Thank you for your offer… but while I want to, there is still a pile of loose ends I need to tie up. There's the White Whale, "Sloth", and the whole deal with the merchants guild…]

Declining Crusch's offer, Subaru shook his head. He was thinking of Julius and Anastasia.

Out of the three factions that joined forces against the White Whale and "Sloth", only Anastasia's purely benefited.

Crusch's camp, by slaying the White Whale, had accomplished a glorious feat four hundred years in the making — but Crusch's amnesia was a devastating blow.

As for Subaru and Emilia's camp that defeated "Sloth", the supposedly well-informed Roswaal's absence from it all doesn't bode well at all.

In terms of casualties, although they didn't suffer heavy losses like Crusch's camp, to Subaru, his loss was far too great to bear.

In comparison, only losing a portion of her mercenaries and supply trains, Anastasia's forces are almost completely intact. And even though she wasn't the

main player in either battle, her forces made tremendous contributions with minimal losses, a highly profitable investment.

While the damage to their forces made the other two factions hesitate in publicizing their victories, it was not a concern for Anastasia.

In order to check Anastasia's ascent, close coordination between Crusch and Emilia's factions will be necessary…

….Seeing Subaru deep in those thoughts, Crusch yawned lazily. Subaru's brows frowned when he saw this, and Crusch, an embarrassed expression on her face, only waved [nothing] with her hands…

[Subaru: Sorry to be so sentimental… but I'm ashamed I can't repay you for your kindness…]

[Crusch: The ones that repay favors right away are not worthy opponents. Don't worry about it when there is so much on your plate. Besides, we received plenty in return already]

Listening to Crusch's courteous words, Subaru turned to look at the front of the special carriage. Compared to the others, it looked like an overly-decorated high-class VIP dragon carriage, and the honor of pulling it goes to—

[Crusch: Such an unambitious request… you want to treat this ground dragon's wounds and take care of her?]

[Subaru: I do owe this ground dragon a great deal. Even though it's only been a relatively short time, the number of times we rode into the brink of death is

more than I can count. And I intend to face many more challenges together with her, so I won't consider Patrasche to be a toy]

[Crusch: —In that case, I have no need to worry]

The ground dragon— Patrasche glanced at Subaru as he spoke, and then, as if rejecting his admiration, turned to Wilhelm. The old swordsman, who up to now had been checking the carriages before their departure, nodded at their conversation.

[Wilhelm: "Diana" is the most difficult breed of ground dragons to please. To shield her master with her own body, Subaru must be quite adored by this ground dragon]

[Subaru: Even though I don't remember much, before the battle with the White Whale, I just decided to choose this one all of a sudden]

It's true they have a bond. This was more than fortunate, because if he picked any other ground dragon, whether it's the White Whale or Betelgeuse, he would not have made it out alive. Anyway,

[Subaru: I can no longer be satisfied by any other ground dragon besides you… Ah, seductive Patrasche!]

Touching the smooth texture of the side of Patrasche's stomach with the palm of his hand as if to show off his affections, Subaru looked into Patrasche's rather pissed-off looking eyes.

To Subaru's overly intimate molestation, the ground dragon reacted with an

expression of profound disgust from the bottom of its heart, and jerked his body as if trying to break Subaru's fingers.

[Subaru: Ow! That's overreacting just to hide your embarrassment! Though with all that exercise wiping windows back in Junior High, my fingers won't break so easily!]

[Wilhelm: The ground dragon is joking with you. Such amiable communication must be an indication of the unwavering trust between you two]

[Subaru: Does that look like communication? It seemed to be just me offering my love one-sidedly and Patrasche rejecting me with her body language!]

That unspoken trust on the battlefield… is woefully absent right now. Now it's just a sassy attitude… But in the end, even with the cold demeanor, Patrasche allowed him to pet her.

Anyway,

[Subaru: So I got my name into the credits for slaying the White Whale, and then I saved Emilia by killing "Sloth". And now I got my beloved ground dragon… The reward is quite nice isn't it]

[Wilhelm: Killing the White Whale, how significant that was, Subaru-dono not realizing this is something admirable indeed. Perhaps one day the world will properly thank you for this great achievement. I look forward to that day]

[Subaru: Yeah I think so too! Wait.. but wasn't I just running around the Whale's nose like bait all that time?]

To Subaru's not even humble words, Wilhelm looked on with an warm smile. His insides itching from that warmth, Subaru shook his head as if trying to get rid of that feeling.

[Subaru: All that aside… I wont be seeing you for a while Wilhelm-san. Please take care of your wound]

[Wilhelm: Sorry I made you worry. It seems the distance is getting farther, the bleeding has stopped. But no matter what, the day when I fight along side Subaru-dono again will come. Until then]

Wilhelm's wound — the unhealable wound dealt by the Previous Generation Sword Saint, Thearesia van Astria. Mentioning this brought a sharpness into Wilhelm's gaze. His mind turned to the Sin Archbishops that assaulted Crusch, "Greed" and "Gluttony".

If the death of the "Sword Demon"'s wife had to do with something other than the White Whale, these two are the most likely suspects.

Subaru, same as Wilhelm, holds a strong hatred for Gluttony. No matter what, they must eventually come face to face with this Sin Archbishop. While the Witch Cult is something they would rather to avoid, "Gluttony" is an entirely different matter. For they must defeat this Sin Archbishop to retrieve those irreplaceable things… Crusch's memory is one, and more importantly—

[Subaru-kyun, Rem-chan is settled in, want to check?]

Saying this, from the carriage window poked out a head with cat-like ears —

Ferris. Seeing Ferris step out of Patrasche's special carriage, Subaru walked over. Peeking in, in the spacious interor, some seats had been replaced with a makeshift bed, and on it, a girl was sleeping.

She was not wearing the familiar maid's dress, but wore a soft blue sleeping gown, that matched the color of her hair. A girl in an unwaking slumber, forgotten by all the world. She loved Subaru, and Subaru loved her. Perhaps, she was that kind of girl.

[Subaru: That thing is safe right?]

[Ferris: Hey I've been careful, I am a healer nyan. Though Rem's physical wounds are already healed, she is no longer a patient nyan]

Silently, Subaru gazed at her sleeping face. Ferris' words were brash, but the side of Ferris' face showed something different from the usual playfulness. Perhaps Ferris was feeling the pain of his own powerlessness, not in regards to Rem, but Ferris' peerless master, Crusch.

[Ferris: You really want to bring her with you?]

[Subaru: Yes, I'll bring her with me. She won't get better by staying here… no I didn't mean it's your fau…]

[Ferris: I know nyan, Subaru-kyun isn't that mean nyan]

Seeing Subaru's embarrassment after his remarks, Ferris smiled awkwardly.

[Ferris: In fact]

Pointing a finger at Subaru,

[Ferris: Aside from Rem, an even bigger concern is Subaru-kyun isn't it?]

[Subaru: Me?]

[Ferris: Don't play dumb nyan, your gate is over-strained nyan. While healing you I had to forcefully inject a large amount of Mana through your gate, it could be a bit damaged nyan. Are you feeling weak or tired, physically and magically?]

At Ferris' question, Subaru turned his neck and shoulders. Spinning around, he couldn't find anything wrong. He jumped a bit and there seemed to be nothing to worry about.

[Subaru: No problem. Both the used parts and the unused parts are fine. Putting the gate aside, I don't usually use magic anyway]

[Ferris: You're not a magic user after all. If it's Ferris, Ferris would have to avoid using magic except in emergencies nyan… en, that's good nyan]

Seeing Subaru aloof to the critical condition of his health, Ferris gave up. With wide, round eyes, Ferris looked around Subaru's neck, pulling around his collar.

[Ferris: But no more straining yourself. Even though Ferris can squeeze out every toxin from Subaru-kyun's body, if your gate shatters into a thousand pieces Ferris won't be able to fix it nyan. So take the time to properly recover it…

about two months nyan]

[Subaru: Two months without magic… for a guy who didn't use magic for 17 years, it's nothing!]

Joking around after hearing the diagnosis… come to think of it, Subaru hasn't even been in this world for two months, even though from his perspective it was more like 4 months — it all feels like a very long time.

Thinking about all that happened since he came to this world, how hard would it be to finally rest for two months? He wasn't sure himself.

[Subaru: En… although I do always manage to get myself caught up in some disaster… Wait, did I just trigger a "Flag"!? I think I heard the sound effect!!]

[Ferris: Too bad, Ferris is no expert on treating brain problems nyan]

Subaru apparently appalled by his own remarks, Ferris looked at him rather disinterestedly.

Affected by this reaction, Subaru decided this conversation should be coming to an end. After some thought, he reached out his hand to Ferris.

[Ferris: Nyan?]

[Subaru: No, I really should thank you for everything you've done to help me. For healing me, and when we're against the Whale and "Sloth" if it weren't for you, it would've all been a mess…… and for Rem, thank you]

[Ferris: ….nyan. You don’t seem to be mocking me nyan, so be it]

[Subaru: Ooo! My ability <<Social.Air.Reading>> has activated! Stay calm!]

A clumsy expression of thanks, but Ferris seemed to like it. In any case, his feelings got through. Ferris held onto the out-reached hand, and they shook.

[Subaru: Such soft, slender fingers… I can’t imagine what you’d be like with masculine hands]

[Ferris: On the cute and perfect Ferris, wouldn’t that be too disappointing nyan? Be it body hair or skin, everything on Ferris is all natural nyan]

Ferris raising a hand with pride, Subaru caught a glimpse of the impeccable white legs under Ferris’ skirt. Taking in the sheer beauty of its form, Subaru’s shoulders dropped dejectedly.

[Subaru: But, he’s a guy…]

[Ferris: Yep, Ferris is a man in body and soul nyan]

[Subaru: How do you get so smug about it? Which part of that is like a man?]

Dressed like a beautiful girl, calling Ferris a man is just too much — Although Subaru isn’t traditional or anything like that, even he knew Ferris’ behavior is the opposite of what would be called manly.

Against Subaru's question, Ferris placed a finger on the corner of those lips. And with a charming shake of the waist,

[Ferris: Because, Crusch-sama said this suits Ferris, what I am, I am, and this most suits the radiance of Ferris' soul. —Crusch-sama's words, Ferris shall repay with everything that I am]

[Subaru: But…]

…the current Crusch doesn't know this… but Subaru held back his words. Even if he doesn't say it, Ferris already knows. And if he does say it, it will only hurt.

Subaru, more than anyone, would hate to do this. If someone talked about Rem, Subaru would be just as agitated. Perhaps Ferris knew this as well.

[—No matter what becomes of the House of Karsten]

[Subaru: ……?]

Suddenly, the voice struck Subaru's eardrums.

Quiet, cold, a voice of frozen emotion.

Who that voice belonged to… if he heard it now, it would still give him pause.

Head lowered, Ferris' expression is hidden behind the hair of his forehead,

impossible to see.

In this way, Ferris held tight onto Subaru's hand.

[Ferris: Only Crusch-sama, I will protect with my life]

[Subaru: …Ferris?]

[Ferris: That – Is – Why]

In front of the dumbfounded Subaru, Ferris' head suddenly lifted, smiling with a jubilant voice. But compared to the playful, mischievous eyes Subaru was so used to seeing, in this instant, it appeared as if those eyes were lying.

[Ferris: Remember the agreement, Subaru-kyun! Otherwise all the Mana in your body will go on a rampage frying your brain until you die nyan]

[Subaru: What are you saying with that smile on your face!? And why are you threatening an ally!?]

[Ferris: Threatening? More like a death sentence nyan]

[Subaru: Worse than I thought!]

Flinging Ferris' hand out of his own, Subaru turned away. For a brief moment, in all this commotion

—he faintly hoped perhaps Rem would react.

Sighing slightly, he pushed his dashed hopes out of his mind.

Near the luggage outside the dragon carriage, he found Emilia and Crusch talking.

[Emilia: Ah, Subaru. Is Rem-san's bed prepared?]

[Subaru: Yep Ferris set it up perfectly. Behold! This is me and Patrasche's GREAT CIRCUS COMBO! We'll show you something even the Great Kinoshita Circus wouldn't be able to show you!]

[Emilia: Even though I don't know what you're talking about, I got a bad feeling about this… let's not do the Great Circus]

[Subaru: The sky! It's too unfortunate! But my heart had already been beating up and down expectant of Emilia-tan's misattribution of arousal!]

Subaru called it the "In this speeding carriage my life is in danger, could this increase in heartbeat be LOVE!?" self-directed battle plan.

But to hear Emilia say "Rem-san"… a piercing pain of unfathomable degree lingered in Subaru heart, refusing to disappear.

For an instant, Emilia's eyes caught onto Subaru's mouth, which had suddenly stopped moving. But before her words came out, Ferris came up behind Subaru.

[Ferris: Well, the dragon carriage is prepared nyan. Sorry it took so long nyan. It's sad to say goodbye — Crusch-sama, anything to say?]

[Crusch: En, yes]

Ferris went to Crusch's side. Subaru went to Emilia's. Taking them both within her sight, Crusch took a deep breath, and placed a hand in front of her chest.

[Crusch: First, though I have said it many times before, you have my deepest gratitude. Even though I can no longer remember, I know that before I lost my memory, I wanted us to cooperate, and to be friends. I thank you once again]

[Emilia: No… I, Crusch-sama, there is nothing to thank me for. These days I've only been kept in the dark and left out of everything…]

[Subaru: En, it's true Emilia-tan didn't do anything. But I have everything handled so don't worry. After all, my achievements are my Emilia-tan's achievements too!]

Seeing Emilia shriveling in embarrassment, Subaru pounded his chest proclaiming this. Stealing a glance at Subaru, Emilia nodded slightly.

[Emilia: Thank you Subaru… Even though I don't remember becoming "your" Emilia…]

[Subaru: M – my battle plan to "subconsciously inject impression of a romantic relationship into third party listeners" has been seen through…!?]

[Emilia: Because I was listening carefully… oh, sorry about that]

All the air pressure deflating from his chest, Subaru sank down, and Emilia apologized to Crusch, who was quietly observing their amiable exchange.

[Crusch: No, the relationship between you two seem wonderful. I must quickly work to return to the way I was with Ferris and Wilhelm]

[Ferris: Ferris will always be open to Crusch-sama in both body and soul nyan!]

Ferris, covering his cheeks with both hands, swerved left and right. While Ferris was swerving like an octopus behind her, Crusch seemed to accept it as it is, with a warm, even feminine, smile emerging on her face.

[Crusch: We will meet again very soon, I think, Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama. I wish we would forever be friends]

That was not a lie, it must have been her true thoughts… Subaru thought this.

Despite losing her memory, she did not lose the nobility of her heart. Honesty illuminates her conduct, false flattery and lies are not compatible with that.

Perhaps because that came through so clearly, Emilia’s eyes opened wide with surprise, her lips trembling faintly.

[Emilia: I am… For Crusch-sama, I am an opposing Candidate. The Alliance… one day it will return to competition between us]

[Crusch: En, that is true. With Emilia-sama as an opponent, I will take care not to fall behind, so I will do my best as well]

[Emilia: And even without that, I am a Half-Elf. With silver hair… Doesn't it scare you?]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan that's…]

She didn't need to ask that, Subaru thought, trying to stop her. Seeing the desperate determination on the side of Emilia's face, he knew this conversation mustn't continue.

Emilia was serious, in asking that question. The emotional part of her knows she should never bring up her identity lightly.

Above all, to bring it up in front of Crusch Karsten. Subaru knew, to let this continue would be…

[Crusch: The soul determines the value of its own existence. For myself, and for others as well, to live with the Soul's fullest radiance, unashamed, is the way we should live]

[Emilia: —-]

[Crusch: Somehow it feels like I've said that many times before. How should I say it…. Now that I've listened to myself, that was pretty sophisticated, wasn't it?]

Crusch covered her mouth and couldn't hold in her laugh. Hearing this, Emilia stood dumbfounded, and did not say a word.

[Crusch: Emilia-sama, are you ashamed of the way you carry out your life?]

[Emilia: …I'm, not. Even if everyone around me thinks so, as long as I am not hated by myself, I can carry on and live this way]

[Crusch: If so, then don't regret anything. Improve yourself, try your hardest, and stay true to the self you deserve. —You have a beautiful Soul]

Smiling, Crusch extended the hand in front of her chest toward Emilia.

[Crusch: To get to know you, I am happy. Fear? Not a single bit]

Biting her lips, Emilia carved those words into her memory, her chest hurting with emotion. She gazed at the outstretched hand. Crusch patiently waited for her. Then, Emilia's fingers met the palm of Crusch's hand, and they exchanged a handshake softly.

[Crusch: No matter what, I expect we will meet again soon]

[Emilia: M-me…… no. Me too, this time I should stand tall in front of Crusch-sama, shouldn't I? Until then, I wish you the best of health]

This way, the two fellow Candidates of the Royal Selection, their promise to each do their best, was sealed.

Looking on from the side, Subaru's heart swelled with the sense of accomplishment. That was one of the goals of Subaru's struggle after struggle… Even though in the end it's impossible for everything to be perfect…

[Subaru: ….after everything we accomplished… why do I still have this sad expression on my face? I don't want to blame it on you… I don't……]

Glancing toward the dragon carriage, appearing in Subaru's eyes was the girl sleeping inside.

In such a happy occasion, Rem would not forgive me like this… Rem wouldn't want to… I'm so selfish aren't I?

[Crusch: Natsuki Subaru-sama, please take care. I will look forward to your future activity… and her recovery]

[Subaru: Much more activity from me… I don't think that's a good idea… To be honest, I'm the kind of guy that runs around trying to do everything as the last resort and still ends up being completely useless. About Rem… Miss Crusch is not an outsider. No matter what, she will recover. I promise, she will]

Crush extended her hand to Subaru. But to shake hands in this state, isn't that way too embarrassing? To cover up his embarrassment, Subaru gave her a high five.

A small sound rang out, and the brief contact between Subaru and Crusch's hands ended. Her hand bouncing off, Crusch's eyes blinked ever so slightly.

[Crusch: We will certainly meet again]

With these words, the master and servant bowed, seeing Subaru and Emilia off.

On the road home, a strange, stifling gloom descended on the dragon carriage.

The carriage itself, Crusch had gifted to Subaru along with Patrasche, as a sign of gratitude. Even without the ornamentation, it was clear that it was an expensive piece of craftsmanship. But from the softness of the seats to the glamour of the interior, everything felt a bit excessive.

The spacious interior could fit ten people inside and still have room left over, so it's no wonder they didn't know what to do with themselves, with only three passengers riding inside.

In the carriage, without a word, Emilia, Subaru and Rem kept the silence. Rem was, of course, sleeping. Next to her, Subaru was waiting, without even considering moving from his current position. Perhaps out of consideration for the unconscious Rem, Emilia held back her words.

[Subaru: ……m]

This is bad, thought Subaru, crossing his arms. Though it would be outrageous to have a lighthearted conversation under these circumstances, there is so much they need to talk about. They need to decide on their stance regarding the Royal Selection, they aren't yet up to date regarding the Alliance with Crusch's faction, and haven't even talked about what had happened over the past few days.

There was also Rem. How would she be taken care of at the mansion if no one

but Subaru remembers her? Even though it's inevitable, just the thought of what Ram might say when she sees the unconscious Rem, sends shivers down his spine.

[Emilia: I know you're worried, but right now I feel the atmosphere might have been better if the kids were riding with us…]

Of course, the kids were also in the entourage heading back to Roswaal's domain. But they must be riding with their parents right now. If they asked about Rem, it would be difficult to explain it to them, and what if the villagers think it's a disease… Unfortunately, the result is the current silence.

What to do now. — It is unusual for Subaru to feel so restrained, he thought as he looked up at the carriage ceiling.

[I don't know what, but can't you two think of something to talk about!? Aaaah, I can't take this awkward silence anymore!!]

[Subaru: What are you saying, sneaking in out of the blue!? Wait, were you there all along?]

[Otto: That's rude! Of course I was here! Do you even remember the conditions under which I agreed to help you out!?]

Otto said in an over-exaggerated way, sticking his head into the carriage from the opening in front, sending a bit of spittle flying along with his voice. Otto was the one driving the carriage, sitting outside in the driver's seat. He stuck his head through the hole connecting the carriage's interior to the driver's platform just to comment on the quietness inside the carriage.

At Otto’s objections, Subaru tilted his head and nodded while muttering [Ah, ah]

[Subaru: I remember, I remember. Right, I remember you asked me to let you meet Roswaal, right? … Ah, but, what can I say…]

[Otto: What is it!?]

[Subaru: Well if you were just chasing after guys it would be one thing, but when the guy is Roswaal… I’m straight by the way, and I already have Emilia, so please don’t come after me]

[Otto: That’s not why I want to talk to him at all! What do you think I am!?]

[Subaru: A trader looking for some excitement?]

[Otto: Why do you treat me like a pervert!?]

Looking at Otto as if pitying him from the bottom of his heart, Subaru shook his head sadly from side to side. Emilia, who had been observing their conversation quietly, suddenly opened her eyes wide and said with a surprised expression

[Emilia: You two… are really good friends, aren’t you? I’m surprised!!]

[Subaru: Oy, oy Emilia-tan. Please stop it with the jokes. Putting me in the same basket as this money-grubbing merchant… The only thing I’m greedy for is

your love!]

[Otto: You're greedy too then!! Ah, wait, I'm not greedy to begin with!]

[Subaru: Otto, shut up]

Sighing at the travelling merchant, Subaru got up and took hold of the flap to close the window to the driver's seat.

[Otto: Ah, wait, don't just treat me like I'm in the way!]

[Subaru: Ok, shut-out!]

The flap was pulled shut with a clap, the face of the man who had been trying until the very end to say something finally disappeared. Joining his fingers and stretching his arms like someone who had just completed a rough task, Subaru turned around to see Emilia blankly looking up at him.

[Subaru: …Puh]

[Emilia: Hihahaha!]

Looking at each others faces, they suddenly burst out laughing.

For a while they let themselves be taken along by their laughter, but after a little while their laughter started to wane, until silence once again descended upon the carriage.

At that moment,

[Subaru: Letting this heavy atmosphere be, really isn't like me, is it?]

[Emilia: You're right, it's not like you at all. The Subaru I know is a much more spirited, unreasonable, lively person. So much so that he completely blows all my bad feelings away]

[Subaru: I feel like that could also be translated into an airhead who can't read the mood…]

In any case, Otto being there had actually cleared up the mood tremendously. Thanking Otto for this would probably make him angry, but nevertheless, Subaru thanked him in his mind while getting up and sitting down next to Emilia as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Seeing this put a wry smile on Emilia's face.

[Emilia: You always just naturally sit next to me huh, Subaru?]

[Subaru: Well, it's natural for someone to want to sit next to the girl they like, so I want to sit as close as I can, and breathe the same air as you]

[Emilia: Geez, the first half of the sentence was embarrassing, and yet somehow the second half of the sentence managed to give off a really bad feeling]

Being hit straight with an earnest confession of love made Emilia's face turn

red, but the pervertedness of the second half made her scowl. Leaning his head toward her at her reaction, Subaru said

[Subaru: Hmm, I was just trying to act like I always do, you know]

[Emilia: Come to think of it, I guess you've always been like that. It's because you're like that that I'm never able to just take in what you're saying…]

As Emilia looked at him, her voice turned into a quiet mumble, then faded completely. Subaru scratched his head, considering whether or not he should pick up the conversation…

[Subaru: Guys just can't mentally handle being straightforward, and not pretending to be kidding around when it comes to this sort of thing. Me loving Emilia-tan, me looking at Emilia-tan in a perverted way, and me wanting to help Emilia-tan are all my true, honest feelings. You can believe that you know?]

[Emilia: I believe it, but believing and accepting are two different things…]

[Subaru: That's fine with me, believe me, and I'll work hard until you accept my feelings]

Thinking about it again, that was a pretty aggressive proclamation. In fact, hearing that from Subaru, Emilia's face was blushing.

Fighting hard to remain unflustered, her cheeks and ears already turned so red that her expression couldn't keep up. She must never have had anyone express their unconditional fondness for her before. Of course Subaru, the one trying to hit on her, didn't have any experience either, so his face was also completely red.

Even so,

[Subaru: Rather than walking on with a downcast expression, this is more like me. Right, Rem?]

[Emilia: …just now, did you say something?]

[Subaru: I was just thinking how nice it would be to lift up your hair so I could stare at your neck pervertedly]

[Emilia: Right there, you are trying to distract me again… You care a lot about Rem-san, don't you?]

Subaru still trying to wisecrack his way out, Emilia's incisive words blocked his escape. Accepting defeat, Subaru smiled bitterly, and turned toward Rem, still sleeping on the bed.

[Subaru: I do, yes. Immensely… I care about her. I'm always thinking I must do something, and I think, and I want to keep on thinking. Even though I wanted Emilia-tan to be the first in my thoughts, this can't be ranked… I'm sorry]

[Emilia: I'm not a bad child that will get angry and throw a tantrum. I won't get angry about something so important… I can tell just by looking, she is very important to Subaru]

Like Subaru, Emilia turned her narrowed gaze to Rem in her sleep. Her lips trembled. Then after a short moment of hesitation, she asked

[Emilia: You… like her. Don’t you?]

[Subaru: I like her. I love her. I love her as much as I love you]

[Emilia: I don’t know how I feel about this, but… Subaru, are you the kind of guy that flirts around?]

[Subaru: I thought I was supposed to be a pretty faithful guy, but having someone be so devoted to you is… a guy who’s heart isn’t moved by that, I don’t think he could have a drop of blood or tear in him]

Thinking back on the loops over the last few days, he remembered how many times he had received Rem’s unconditional love. Receiving it all, how could his heart not move? By the time he noticed, her existence inside his heart had already become far too large to ignore.

[Emilia: Even though you told me that you love me]

[Subaru: Just to make it clear, I love Rem a lot, but Rem still loves me WAY more, you know? She’s completely fallen head over heels for me, and I seriously can’t understand why]

Hugging his shoulders, he wondered how she could love him so selflessly. To be loved this much by a girl like Rem, was he really worthy of it?

He still couldn’t help but wonder why. But even so, as the man she fell for, the very least he could do is try to live up to what she sees in him.

Seeing Subaru's downcast self appraisal, Emilia's lips relaxed.

[Emilia: I think I understand her]

[Subaru: Huh?]

[Emilia: The reason Rem-san came to reeally love you. I'm sure it's because she got to see Subaru's good side up close, a lot. You're kind of like a disease that sometimes becomes really incredible, and does some reeally incredible things]

[Subaru: A disease? I… can't actually deny that]

Subaru scratched his cheek and pouted, showing his dissatisfaction. Emilia, unaffected, held her stern expression as if to say "it's true you know", then, closing her eyes

[Emilia: I won't fall for you that easily you know]

[Subaru: That makes the effort all the more worth it! One day, I will make Emilia-tan go all gooey and fall for me, wake Rem from her sleep, and settle this in a nice way. Aaaah, I'm smiling just thinking about it!]

To have Emilia and Rem each pull on one of his hands, fighting over his one and only body. That would be a such a blissful, incredible sight.

Which is why definitely, definitely one day—

[Subaru: I'll have you two pull me until I split in a thousand pieces!]

[Emilia: I have no idea what you're thinking, but I feel like I have to say this: I'm not going to do anything like that!]

Ever since that conversation, the discussion inside the carriage went smoothly.

After all, they've been waiting for the larger half of a day to talk. And since there was a lot they had to talk about, they had only just enough time to do it.

Sharing everything about the past few days with Emilia, eventually Otto joined their conversation as well, and even took part in their planning for the future.

To sum everything up,

[Subaru: Basically, if we don't meet with Roswaal then we can't plan anything, right?]

After all that, the conclusion was the same as the starting point of the conversation.

Roswaal is the only person who understands the full capacities and powers of Emilia's Faction, so nothing can proceed without him.

[Subaru: Well, if Ram, who went to the Sanctuary, met Roswaal, we could naturally get him to return to the Mansion. But I'd slap him in the face first, before we have a good talk with him]

[Otto: You're very aggressive toward your employer, huh, Natsuki-san?]

[Subaru: I think I have a right to do that after all he did! He'd deserve every bit of it!]

Thinking back on the mess Roswaal left for Subaru to clean up, this is more or less an appropriate response. In fact, Emilia didn't seem to have any intention of stopping Subaru, as if permitting him to do it "just this one time".

As their discussion was summed up and the topic turned toward matters of the Roswaal domain, their dragon carriage left the forests and entered the village

—they instantly realized something was wrong.

The village that Subaru had gotten so used to seeing, seemed just as desolate and dreary as right after the battle with Betelgeuse. But there was not even any sign of the soldiers of the Expedition that stayed behind.

To put it simply, it seems none of the villagers had returned.

[Otto: I don't see anyone, Natsuki-san. It doesn't look like the area was devastated or anything, it just looks like nobody is here]

Getting off the dragon carriage, Otto voiced his thoughts as he looked around the village with several of the returning villagers. Even Subaru, who looked around with a different group, came to the same conclusion.

In the somber silence, memories of past loops — where the villagers were slaughtered, massacred by Betelgeuse' fingers, all of a sudden struck Subaru like a nightmare returning. But he was sure that he was just overthinking it.

But then, that raises the other question

[Subaru: Ram said from here to the Sanctuary is only around 7 to 8 hours… but then why are they later than us, if we stayed in the Capital for three days?]

[Otto: They might not know that we took down the Witch Cult, so maybe they're being cautious?]

[Subaru: Roswaal abandoning his lands? I assume if Roswaal fought "Sloth" face-to-face, Roswaal would probably win. Even if it isn't "Sloth"'s style to fight head-on, Roswaal should have at least come here to scout]

Roswaal, who can even fly, could easily return to his territory. If he intended to, he could scout the perimeters of the Mansion for any remaining threats, and ensure the land was safe to return to. But he didn't.

[Subaru: Either he's being overly cautious or…]

[Emilia: Something happened in the Sanctuary?]

Both Subaru and Emilia's opinions matched, and looking at each other, they nodded. No matter what, they have to find out what the situation in the Sanctuary is.

Their concerns aside, the villagers had worries of their own.

After all, about 60% of the villagers had headed for the Sanctuary. Those that returned from the Capital: the children who resolved to accompany Emilia, their parents, and the young men's militia that went with them, only comprised about 40% of the villagers. Without the rest, the functioning of the village is severely affected.

Besides, the people's minds tend to always turn to the worst.

[Subaru: No matter what, we have to do something… For now, let's head back to the Mansion. I want to settle Rem down as well. Plus Otto, you don't have anywhere to stay after all, so come to the Mansion with us]

[Otto: What!? To trouble the ma-Margrave for lodging!? If I have to be in such a heck of a situation, I would rather sleep in the dragon carriage!]

[Subaru: Shut up, you're already involved. Better get used to it because I'll use you until you die off!]

Ignoring Otto's objections, Subaru said goodbye to the villagers and told Patrasche to head for the Mansion.

In a distance of 15 minutes on foot, and 5 minutes by carriage, lies the nostalgic Mansion of Roswaal.

Last time, he didn't have the opportunity to appreciate the sight, so when he looked up at it again, this time, there was something emotional about it all.

[Subaru: Well, nothing seems to have changed. …Ram and the others don't seem to have returned, either]

[Emilia: But, Beatrice must still be inside. I hope she knows where the Sanctuary is]

[Subaru: Wha-really? Crap… I thought Emilia-tan would know where the Sanctuary is. Then how do we confirm if Roswaal's alright?]

The fundamental objective of their plan collapsing, Subaru furrowed his brows at the looming darkness ahead.

Emilia's beautiful face also showed the colors of grief. Otto, unable to join in the conversation, only looked up, enchanted by the great Mansion and its surroundings, as if driving through a dream.

[Subaru: Tch. Crap. Well, we just have to hope Beatrice knows something about it]

[Otto: Hey, why were you clicking your tongue while staring right at me?]

[Subaru: Tch. It's your self-consciousness. No one cares about you as much as you think]

[Otto: Wow that's a terrible comment!]

Ignoring the partially depressed Otto, Subaru parked the dragon carriage in

the front yard, and headed straight to the entrance.

First, get Beatrice, then, scout the Mansion, then, secure a bed for Rem, then think of future plans again—

[Subaru: I'm back, Roswaal's Mansion! Here comes my nostalgic h…]

Saying that, pushing open the grand door, Subaru's voice clogged up.

Because he was met by a completely different sight than expected.

The entrance hall was spread with gorgeous carpets, in the corners of the stairs leading to the upper floor were expensive looking vases filled with colorful flowers.

From the ceiling, hung beautiful crystal lamps that could be called the chandeliers of this Parallel World.

The familiar entrance hall, was very much different from what he expected.

For instead of what he expected—

[Subaru: It's not even vandalized…… it's actually arranged!?]

The mats were straightened nicely without a single crease, and the flowers in the vases in the corners of the stairs were blooming vibrantly; the chandeliers were delicately taken care of and were shining graciously, even more than usual.

Stunned by this surreal scene, Subaru lost his words and stood still.

Because of his excessive amazement, his reactions were all too late.

[Subaru: —Who is it!?]

A small, weak, almost inaudible sound, and Subaru frantically shot his glance toward its direction.

But, when noticed the Shadow, it was already too late.

The Shadow had already ran up behind him and then—

Subaru saw it. From behind him, as if eclipsing the moon, the shadow engulfed him whole.

In that shadow… a mouth filled with white fangs, as if of a beast, were clear in back of his eyes.

—And in the next moment, before he could even realize… Subaru's consciousness, and his world, had been dragged to darkness.

Chapter 02 [Insults and Gratitude]

—Oy, Subaru, dying here would be pretty miserable.

Still muddled, lying there shaking his head, Subaru lifted himself up and looked around.

He was usually good at waking up, but the reason he couldn't get his thoughts together was simply because he wasn't exactly "sleeping". He tried hard to remember what had happened before he lost consciousness, but the first thing that occurred to him was that he was in a very familiar room.

[Subaru: This is the Mansion's living room… isn't it?]

[Oh, Subaru, you're awake?]

A voice mumbled as if trying to make sure, then the door opened and Emilia's face poked through.

Her silver hair in a braid, she had a slightly bright expression on her face as she walked over to Subaru on the couch, and bending over, she met his gaze.

Being stared at so intently by her wide, round eyes, Subaru shrank down a little.

[Subaru: Uhm, Emilia-tan, what happened?]

[Emilia: As soon as you entered the mansion we heard you scream. Otto and I

were really shocked. Then when we ran inside to see…]

[Subaru: I, was sleeping?]

[Emilia: Saying it like that is a little deceiving……but it's not technically wrong, I suppose?]

Emilia put a finger to her lips, and tilted her head slightly to the side. There was no sense of urgency in her reply.

Scrambling when he just woke up, now seeing her in this relaxed manner, Subaru realized there was no emergency. Yet even so, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was out of the ordinary.

He was certain that just before he lost consciousness, some kind of animal with sharp fangs had——

[Miss Emilia, might I have a moment?]

There was a knock on the door from the outside, followed by the sound of a woman's voice calling out to Emilia. Looking in the direction of the voice, she gave her assent with a small [Sure], and the door opened slowly.

Looking at the door casually opening, Subaru couldn't help but feel mystified.

—I don't recall ever hearing that voice before.

His doubt was soon confirmed when he saw what stood just outside the doorway.

[I brought drinks and additional hand towels —Oh, I see you are awake already]

The form of the smiling woman imprinted itself into Subaru's eyes.

It was a woman with long, almost translucent blonde hair, the lines of her back were in perfect posture. Her appearance and behavior was in every way refined, and in her fluid motions there was not a hint of unnecessary movement.

She was wearing the same familiar outfit as other servants of the Roswaal Mansion —the cute and practical maid's uniform, with not so much as a crease or wrinkle visible.

The plate in her hands held a water pitcher and hand towels, which she placed softly down on the stand in the center of the room without making a sound. —If she were being scored, she would have passed with flying colors…

…that is, only if you overlooked her ferocious-looking physique and her fiendish smile.

The uniform may be worn perfectly, but the one wearing it was slightly taller than Subaru, with an athletic build similar to his. If she were a he, it would have seemed healthy and strong, but when it was on a female, everything instantly crumbled.

What's more, the smile at the end of her perfectly fluid motion —was

completely ruined by the set of sharp fangs peeking out through the corner of her mouth. Looking even closer, there was something unnatural about the sharpness of her gaze, and her greens pupils seemed to give off a glinting light, like a carnivorous, feline beast eyeing its prey.

[Frederica: It is a pleasure to meet you. I am a servant of the household of Margrave Roswaal L. Mathers, Frederica Baumann…]

[Subaru: Scary face—!?]

Her respectful introduction was interrupted by the overly candor words that slipped out of Subaru's mouth. Upon hearing this, the woman's expression congealed, and after her fiendish eyes blinked several times ——tears began to form.

[Frederica: …sniffle, sniffle…]

[Subaru: Wha…?]

[Emilia: Subaru you dunce!!]

Without a word, the woman turned her face away, and even Subaru was shocked. Right after, he was assaulted by both an angry voice, and the painful sensation of having his ear pulled. [Ow, ow!] Letting out a cry and turning to look, he saw Emilia with her usually gentle brows furrowed angrily.

[Emilia: That's a terrible thing to say to a girl! Frederica did so much to take care of you and you…]

[Frederica: I-I ask that you might let it go, Miss Emilia. It is quite alright. I was… I was the one in the wrong after all. I was so happy to have been called back to the mansion, I got too over-excited…and forgot that my looks are usually unpleasant for many…]

Pulling on the hem of Emilia's sleeve, she— the woman called Frederica was shaking her head. With her other hand she was covering her mouth.

[Frederica: I apologize for startling you so. More than that, I did something very inappropriate a short while ago. I never thought I would mistake Natsuki Subaru-sama for an intruder]

[Subaru: Intruder….ah, wait a minute. I think I understand what happened now]

Released from Emilia's chastisement for the moment, Subaru massaged his ear while taking in her words. In fact, he kind of realized the gist of what happened.

Basically, the mysterious figure he ran into right after entering the mansion was—

[Subaru: When I returned to the mansion, Frederica-san thought I was an intruder, and so tried to take me out. Then, Emilia-tan came in after me, and cleared up the misunderstanding, and that brings us to now…right?]

[Frederica: That's exactly right…you really can process things quickly I see]

[Subaru: There are things I can't read from just the situation though…no, before that]

Frederica's agreement confirming his thoughts, Subaru then turned his gaze to Emilia who was now standing behind Frederica, nudging her chin to point in Frederica's direction. He was painfully aware of the meaning behind Emilia's action. So Subaru stood up from the couch, and facing Frederica, said

[Subaru: Nice to meet you, I am very sorry for saying something so uncalled for all of a sudden. I know I can't make excuses like having just woken up, or that I was just joking around and expect to be forgiven. You can decide whether to boil or fry me…though I would be really thankful if there wasn't much pain involved]

To say he was acting like a man, it was more like Subaru dipped his head while saying this somewhat limp apology.

They definitely started off on the wrong foot, but unlike her, who had only attacked a suspicious intruder, Subaru's words were just completely rude. So, just as he said, if it would clear up her anger, Subaru would willingly accept any kind of punishment.

Preferably without physical pain, and his hopes were rather leaning towards emotional abuse instead…

That much was the commitment of the man Subaru's rather effeminate apology.

[Frederica: —-Haha, you really are a funny guy]

With those words, her smile hiding behind the hand covering her mouth, Frederica blew it all away.

At the question mark floating above Subaru's head, Frederica bowed, the translucent, golden hair flowing around her face.

[Frederica: I should really be the one apologizing. On Miss Emilia's request, I have been testing you]

[Subaru: Testing?]

At Frederica's words, both Subaru and Emilia tilted their heads. They had no idea what she was talking about.

It'd be fine if Subaru was confused, but if he were to believe her words, then it would be strange to see Emilia showing the same air of confusion as well. Looking at their synchronous response, Frederica's smile deepened.

[Frederica: Even though I may have been acting according to my sense of duty to protect the mansion, what I did to Subaru-sama was still rude. I was prepared, or rather left with no other choice, but to be relieved of my position after such an act]

[Subaru: No, I think you jumped to that conclusion way too soon. I'm a guy who will understand if we talk things out, right?]

[Frederica: Then, Miss Emilia asserted herself ever so firmly. She really tried so hard, I thought for sure even my face would turn red from the flowery things she was saying about Subaru…]

[Subaru: Wha!?]

Shocked by what she had just said, Subaru let out a strangled cry, looking towards Emilia. While Emilia was standing there trying so hard to hide her own deep scarlet countenance.

[Emilia: Fre–de–ri–ca–!]

Hands on her hips, Emilia uncharacteristically let out a hysterical voice, glaring sharply at the maid. On the receiving end of all that, Frederica calmly retorted

[Frederica: Oh my, so scary… I see Miss Emilia hasn't changed, still not cute at all. Normally, whether what I said was true or not, turning red and getting flustered would have been the prettiest response]

[Emilia: Eh, really…? Wait, I'm not going to get tricked today. Even someone like me, always getting tricked, would learn to know better! That's right, I know when you're lying, one of your eyes goes lazy!]

[Frederica: I had no idea that was the case. By the way Miss Emilia, did you know that whenever you lie, your ears get a little longer?]

[Emilia: No way!?]

Emilia's expression of victory, an arm outstretched and a finger pointing towards Frederica, was interrupted when she darted her hands back to grab both her ears. Getting this response, at that point Frederica's victory was

complete.

Still flustered, Emilia seemed not to have realized she lost, but Subaru, who had been watching her intently, let out a sigh and shrugged his shoulders.

[Subaru: Seems like I've been completely defeated… My name is Natsuki Subaru and… do I even need to do an introduction?]

[Frederica: Yes, of course. I would love to hear it. Let's start over and get to know each other properly this time]

With those words, Frederica removed the hand covering her mouth, revealing a smile lined with pointed fangs. This time, seeing her weaponized-smile, all the wind left Subaru's lungs.

[Subaru: Come to think of it, I think I heard of you… a maid who quit a little while ago before I arrived here, right? I came to the mansion about a month ago… so it's been three months since you left?]

[Frederica: That seems to be right. I had resigned my position due to personal reasons, and I still remember how painfully lonely it felt, leaving here. … But it seems that I was able to return much sooner than I expected]

Covering her mouth with her sleeve, Frederica smiled. As long as she covers her mouth, her beautiful golden hair and her cold, barely passable gaze, would combine into something even resembling feminine beauty. But her mischievous personality and her mouth-full of fangs tend to negate that no matter what.

In the living room of the Roswaal Mansion, Subaru and Frederica have just

exchanged some basic information beyond their names. Listening to her self-introduction again, he seemed to recall having heard that name before.

[Subaru: Three months ago, so that means you're acquainted with Emilia-tan, right?]

[Emilia: Hrmph! That would be correct, yes]

[Subaru: Who says 'Hrmph' these days? Also sulking like that is so outdated it's cute, geez]

To Subaru's question and gaze, Emilia sat down onto the couch, averting her eyes as if refraining from joining the conversation, though she was obviously still listening intently. She had been acting like this ever since she realized, too late, how Frederica had tricked her. But that aside,

[Subaru: It's only been two or three days since you returned, right? We left from the village three days ago……four if you count the traveling time. It seems to be quite a coincidence]

[Frederica: I was surprised too when I returned to the mansion to find it empty. Luckily, there was a letter explaining things in the master's study, so I avoided the worst of the confusion]

[Subar: A letter?]

[Frederica: Yes, from Ram. She was the one who called me back to the mansion, though she was rather haphazard in her communication…. I know it's indulging her too much to pass it off as her personality, but that's how I feel]

Through Frederica's half-awkward smile, Subaru saw the time-worn bond she and Ram must have shared, and all the wonderful days they have passed together. At the same time, erased from her memories, her time spent with Rem must have been just as long.

[Subaru: Could you tell me why Ram called you back?]

[Frederica: I don't completely understand the reason myself. But Miss Emilia was here at the time, I am sure she would know]

At once, both their gazes poured onto Emilia inquisitively. Even now, Emilia continued to maintain her "I'm still really, really angry," attitude, turning her face away. But, as she slowly became unable to resist the attention focused on her, she tried to steal a quick glance in their direction. Only, it ended up being a rather obvious glance.

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, cheer up… or, actually, I'm not the one who upset you this time. Frederica, apologize properly would you?]

[Frederica: I ask for your forgiveness, Miss Emilia. What I did a moment ago was not nice and I apologize. I was so happy we could meet again after so long, my bad side just, slipped out]

[Emilia: …You won't tease me like that anymore?]

[Frederica: No, I will refrain from doing so. For all the world I will never again tease Miss Emilia in that manner again]

Subaru couldn't quite get rid of the feeling that the wording of Frederica's apology left some room for interpretation. However, our Goddess Emilia seemed to believe in those words without a second thought, and her up-to-now sulking expression relaxed into one that seemed to say, "I suppose it can't be helped".

[Emilia: I understand. I'm not angry anymore. Is that good enough?]

[Frederica: Yes, I am very sorry for before, Miss Emilia. ——Too easy.]

Somehow, only Subaru heard that last part. He jerked his head to look at Frederica, but she was playing dumb. Emilia, who had no idea she was being considered "too easy," placed a finger to her cheek and said,

[Emilia: So, let's see. The reason Frederica was called back to the mansion… umm]

[Subaru: Yeah, yeah. Rushing to call back someone you fired would mean there's some kind of emergency…actually, I think I might have an idea]

There was indeed an emergency, it was only a few days ago that the Mansion and Arlam village were targeted by the Witch Cult. Considering her skill, which had been able to knock Subaru unconscious in an instant, Ferderica must be another shady maid of the Roswaal Mansion with some crazy combat abilities. In short, Ram must have called her back to buff the mansion's defences during their state of—

[Emilia: It was because Ram's aptitude for housework is catastrophic, and the mansion ended up in an unimaginable state of disarray. It was only a few days, but it kept getting harder and harder to live in]

[Subaru: That's actually a very compelling reason!! She really is all talk and no… wait, Ram knows she's hopeless, she even said so herself! She's right about that at least, but then she should have put in some effort to improve!! Right!?]

Subaru's chest felt like it would explode from how compelling that reality was compared to his over-guessing of the situation.

Emilia let out a wry smile at his outburst, and shifted her gaze to the living room— or rather, to the entirety of the mansion, as though she could see through its very walls.

[Emilia: But, since Frederica returned, the mansion really has become quite tidy. I think Ram made the right decision in leaving it to someone capable, rather than make things worse by ignoring it]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, I don't think you meant it, but that statement's like a slap to the face! And, well, I still don't think that's a good enough reason for her to give up so easily]

[Frederica: Putting Ram's assessment aside for the moment, it has been such a long time since I have been given the opportunity to do some really worthwhile work. Luckily, since no one was around, I was able to spend the time on further cleaning the mansion]

Listening to Frederica speak of diligently holding up this household, Subaru held his breath, unable to ignore the pain wrenching in his heart.

For this, was the forces of the world compensating for the eradication of

Rem's existence by the Authority of "Gluttony".

[Subaru: I guess since Ram can't run the mansion by herself, the obvious solution was to rely on someone else…]

So Ram had contacted Frederica, who had resigned, asking her to return to the mansion. Without Rem, the Roswaal estate couldn't continue to function, and so, Rem's replacement, Frederica, had arrived.

Yet, the only one in the world who knows of this sad truth is Subaru. Ram had only done as necessity demanded, without stopping to think about why she needed Frederica's help all of a sudden, or just how she had managed to take care of the estate until then. That was all there was to it.

But,

[Subaru: Sorry for being serious all of a sudden but… is it a requirement for all the maids of Roswaal's Mansion to be so quirky?]

[Frederica: ……? Considering who our master is, what's the point of even asking that question?]

[Subaru: That's annoyingly persuasive!]

At this point, all of Subaru's doubts have been answered. Seeing his response, Frederica nodded her head contentedly, and resuming her perfect posture, stared fixedly at Subaru. Then, casually, in a lowered voice,

[Frederica: By the way, the driver of the dragon carriage outside the mansion has been left out there for over an hour now……is that alright?]

[Subaru: Hmm? Oh, you mean Otto. I see, it's already been an hour…… Well, I don't think it's that big of an issue. I want to hurry and let Patrasche rest in the stable, but you don't need to pay attention to that Otto guy too much…]

[Otto: For a companion who shared a near-death experience together, that is really quite heartless, Natsuki-san! I never thought I was lower in priority than a ground dragon!]

Right on cue, Otto dramatically opened the doors to the living room. His shoulders hunched up angrily, he was glaring at Subaru while disapprovingly breathing through his nostrils. At his entrance, Subaru slowly stood up, shook his head, and sighed.

[Subaru: No, Otto, you're mistaken]

[Otto: How am I mistaken? It's too late to take back your words from a moment ago……]

[Subaru: It's not that you're lower in priority than a ground dragon. It's that you are much, much lower in priority than a ground dragon]

[Otto: That's twice over! That's even worse!]

Content with Otto's response and foot-stomping, Subaru turned his gaze toward the window. That is, toward the front yard where the dragon carriage pulled by Patrasche was parked.

Otto followed his gaze, and seemed to understand its meaning. With a still somewhat bitter face, he spoke,

[Otto: I've already put Patrasche in the stables. She is a proud and difficult child, but she didn't want to cause Natsuki-san any trouble, so she was quite docile]

[Subaru: Hearing that from you, it makes me doubt your Divine Protection of "Animal Whispering". If she were a woman, Patrasche would have been a total kuudere, even though she'd be soft on the inside. When did this change happen??]

[Otto: How would I know that kind of thing. More importantly……]

As Subaru was still struggling to understand just what made Patrasche so devoted to him, Otto moved the conversation to the other matter regarding the dragon carriage, that is—-

[Otto: What should be done about the girl sleeping in the carriage? I think it's rather pitiful to leave her shut up in there. If you are busy I could carry her to a room……]

[Subaru: —Don't you lay a finger on Rem]

There was not a hint of malice in Otto's proposal. But his own voice was ice cold… Subaru himself was surprised by the razor sharpness of it, when he saw Otto flinch.

It was almost a whisper, the words were low and dark, a reflection of the viscous heaviness of his mind. It was good that this did not reach the ears of the girls, but still, Subaru was deeply disturbed by the abnormality of the sound that had escaped his throat.

[Subaru: ……I'll bring her in, so you don't have to do anything. Your back would be screaming if you had to carry around a girl anyway]

[Otto: You know, merchants are always handling heavier goods during their work. We aren't as weak as you seem to think, Natsuki-san]

Subaru tried to cover up his last statement with quip, and was thankful for Otto's conciliatory reply, which came after a moment of hesitation. He let out a sigh.

No matter what, his reaction was too extreme. Even though it wasn't intentional— Or rather, it was precisely because it was not intentional that it was a problem. His nerves had been on-end, and anyone who even tries to interfere with Rem, regardless of their intentions, seemed to him to be an enemy.

[Subaru: This is not a good pattern……Damn it, I feel so wretched. Why am I always so……]

He was supposed to have overcome this, yet here he was immediately stumbling over the first pebble he came across. Why does he never have the strength to stay standing tall?

If Rem was here, if Emilia was watching— if both of them were here now with

him, surely he would have that unwavering strength.

[Subaru: I brought it upon myself….. No, I forced Rem to pay that price. What a deadbeat I am!]

There should have been a better, more perfect way.

He had believed that he did his uttermost, up to the end of the loop several days ago he deeply believed that. But there must have been an even better, seamless, perfect outcome somewhere. But Subaru had missed his chance to find it, in his complacency, in his cowardice, he compromised into an imperfect future. And Rem's sacrifice was the price.

If he had been more competent, he would have noticed it.

Before evacuating Emilia and Ram from the mansion, the handwritten letter he had given to Crusch's messenger had already turned blank. He had thought that a Witch Cultist accompanying the messenger had switched the letter in a ploy to sow confusion, but that is laughable.

There was no chance the Witch Cult could have been aware of their threat, and how could he have believed that the Witch Cult would use such a roundabout way to plant seeds of distrust between their two forces? More than that, if they went to all this trouble, compared to a blank letter would it not have been more effective to alter the contents?

Then why, why was the handwritten letter blank? If it was not the work of the Witch Cult, then there could only be one answer.

[Subaru: Rem wrote the letter. I was the one who asked it to be delivered, and Crusch was the one who gave it to the messenger, so the reality of it being handed over remained, and only the contents were erased]

That is the Authority of “Gluttony”, and the fate of those whose name and memories were eaten. An existence erased from the world, leaving only a complex web of incongruities behind. If you weren’t aware of it, you’d never feel the unease, you’d never even realize anything had been missing.

If that was the case, for who, or for what, would have been the purpose of that existence—-.

Looking deeper into the fact that the letter was blank, properly investigating, fathoming, delving into the truth, perhaps he could have done it.

What Emilia had said then, come to think of it, the letter had arrived on the evening before the final day. At that moment, the contents of the letter were already gone, then Rem would have been attacked before that time. If so, then hardly any time had passed since Subaru and Rem had parted ways. The chances of being able to catch up were minuscule, but at least there was a chance.

Only, Subaru had let that chance slip by. Why it had slipped by, he could no longer tell. Had he really not felt anything was out of place?

Ram, with her sister-complex, Emilia, who was aware they had left Rem with him in the Capital, yet they had not mentioned Rem at all, so why—

[Subaru:—Ah]

He finally realized it.

At that moment, Subaru let out an idiotic cry and brought his hand to his forehead. With wobbly movements he slid over to the wall, and smashed his head as hard as he could against it.

Shock and pain. But once wasn't enough, again, again, and again he repeated.

[Emilia: Wh, Subaru!?]

At his inexplicable action, the three with him were shocked into speechlessness. But Emilia was first to return to her senses, and called out to him bewilderedly. She gripped his shoulder from behind, turning him around,

[Emilia: What's wrong all of a sudden? It's not like this is the first time you've done something strange, but this is… Oh—, look your forehead has gotten all red!]

[Subaru: The extent of my stupidity, from the bottom of my heart I am amazed, really]

Feeling the coolness of the tips of Emilia's fingers on his forehead, Subaru shook away his head in a trance of self-loathing. Like he said, he could not bear to look at this own foolishness.

Then, suddenly drawing close to Emilia, Subaru fixed his gaze into her's.

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, I have a favor to ask]

[Emilia: Wh, wha—? Hold on, Subaru, your face is close, and your eyes are scaring me……]

[Subaru: My helpless idiocy… could you please insult me a little?]

[Emilia: Huh?]

Startled, Emilia grew wide-eyed. Seeing rejection in her response, Subaru reached out to place both hands on her shoulders, holding her tightly preventing her from running away, and then brought his face in even closer.

[Subaru: Please. Don’t forgive me, just insult me]

[Emilia: Th, that, I can’t do that. I don’t think you’ve done wrong or anything……]

[Subaru: JUST FIND A WAY!]

[Emilia: Even if you ask me that……]

[Subaru: Please! If you do this for me, I’ll offer you my very soul……!]

[Emilia: Saying something this heavy is only making me more uncomfortable! Geez, I guess I really don’t have a choice]

Emilia hesitated agonizingly against Subaru’s desperate, perverse plea, but

finally she nodded in resignation. She cleared her throat and looked up at Subaru.

[Emilia: Subaru you blockhead!]

[Subaru: Uuu—]

[Emilia: You naughty, hyperactive, stubborn, selfish, rascal, don't know when to give up, get way too cocky jerk!]

[Subaru: Gu..gu..gul…]

[Emilia: No one asked you, yet you only worry about other people, and don't know your limit. You're a softie who supports a hated half-elf. When I am rebuked and feeling depressed, you take my place, and behave rashly, get abused and do reckless things]

[Subaru: gu……Eh?]

[Emilia: You listen but don't respond properly, a coward who flirts and then runs away. A fool who comes to help someone in trouble, even after they had a huge fight. When things just aren't working out, when you want something you say the right thing it's so unfair. Then, when it's all over, and everyone is running around taking care of the loose ends, you go to sleep by yourself and slack off. Subaru, you dullard!]

[Subaru: Dullard, now there's a word you don't hear much anymore……You know, Emilia-tan]

He had been expecting a rebuke, but the abuse he received was far from it. The words didn't scratch at his heart and leave ugly scars, instead they were deep and kind, and left their mark on his and Emilia's hearts alike.

At Subaru's call, Emilia kept her gaze pointed up at him, pursing her lips.

[Emilia: What]

[Subaru: How do I say this… is that how you feel about me?]

[Emilia: I know, it's like all my feelings just flew out. Then I sort of went with it and after a while I had no idea what I was saying. …Subaru, do you think that is how I really feel?]

[Subaru: I wonder. When you get caught up in the moment, are they your true feelings……I don't know if I could tell]

At the very least, Subaru had experience regretting things he said in the heat of the moment.

Were those long pent up feelings wanting to finally escape her heart, or just the thoughtless emotions of a moment blurted out all of a sudden?

He thought no one could ever answer that question.

[Subaru: Thank you, Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: All I did was say bad things about you. To get thanked for that…… Subaru, you really are abnormal aren't you?]

[Subaru: 'Abnormal', but for Emilia-tan alone. If I hear it from you, then no matter if it's insult, abuse or a traffic safety poem, it will stir up my pleasure senses]

[Emilia: The last one I didn't understand, but it seems like something I reealy don't need to know so I'll forget I heard it. —So, are you satisfied now?]

She tried to respond while suppressing a giggle, but in the very end, her eyes looked tinged with sorrow.

It was unfair, the raw expression she showed him sometimes, and it was why he couldn't leave her be.

In answer to her gesture, Subaru smiled a broad smile that showed his teeth.

[Subaru: Yeah, I'm fine now. Actually, maybe I'm still not okay. But, if I were to get a kiss from Emilia-tan to break my curse, I should be able to find the courage I need, if only……]

[Emilia: That's too bad, because the request office has closed for the day]

[Subaru: Damnit! I screwed up! Why am I always……too late……ah!]

As if full of regret, Subaru fell to pieces. Seeing this, Emilia let out a wry smile.

After spending some time looking wretched, Subaru finally stood up and looked around the room.

[Subaru: That said, I'm afraid there is some business I need to take care of. I feel bad for leaving everyone and Emilia-tan, but I need a little time. I don't think it will take too long but….What's with your face, Otto?]

[Otto: I feel like charging you for reparations after witnessing that ticklish scene, but I'll leave the negotiations on pricing for later…What were you doing!?]

Otto, forgotten until now, voiced his discontent, to which Subaru crossed his arms and cocked his head in contemplation. Come to think of it, Otto doesn't know about the last person in this mansion he has yet to become acquainted with.

If that's the case, to tell Otto where he was planning on going next, just what words would be proper.

After agonizing over the problem for just a bit, Subaru unfolded his arms and said,

[Subaru: Well, I'm going to go meet a loli with drill curls holed up in a room that smells like mold]

With that, he completely abandoned any responsibility to explain the situation, and left Otto to his state of confusion.

Prelude to Chapter 3: Excerpt from Arc 3 Chapter 71 [The Girl in the Forbidden Library]

In another loop, lost to the memories of all except Natsuki Subaru,

Betelgeuse had been knocked unconscious and was captured alive to prevent him from possessing another body. The Gospel taken from Betelgeuse is tucked away in Subaru's jacket.

Undisguised, Subaru came to the Mansion to evacuate Emilia and Ram. Only Beatrice was still in the Forbidden Library, and Subaru stayed behind to find her…

[Subaru: Wha—? This is odd!?]

Even though Subaru had heroically volunteered to find Beatrice and set out full of bravado… it's not going so well.

Usually, when Subaru wants to call Beatrice to come to dinner, all he has to do is to open the first door he sees and he'd find Beatrice and the Forbidden Library on the other side. One time, he even found her just by opening the door to the dining room.

Beatrice's magic, "Door Crossing" is a Spatial-Transition Dark-Type magic of a level far beyond Subaru's comprehension.

A little girl, and an expert user of Dark Magic, Beatrice uses the doors of the mansion to randomly obscure the Forbidden Library's entrance. Basically, there is only one right choice, and as if to toy with anyone who seeks to find it, the right choice would continually change without warning.

Somehow, Subaru easily breaks this with what he casually calls his "Door Breaking" ability, and it's unclear exactly why the one person who can always find the door in the first attempt just also happens to be someone who utterly can't read the mood.

[Subaru: To suddenly stop working at a time like this, it's a whole new level of disappointment, geez… After bragging like that to Emilia and Ram, if I still can't find you—— I don't think I can just play cute and charm my way out of it, so please come out, oy…]

He muttered while opening all the doors in the servant's quarter one by one, having already opened all the doors in the central building where he first started, he's wasted quite a lot of time. This is the first time he's had so much difficulty finding Beatrice, and even if he tries to make light of the situation, it still won't stop the sweat from forming on his brows.

……

No matter what, in an empty mansion opening every single door one after the other only to be disappointed again and again, all this must look pretty pitiful to a bystander.

[Subaru: Damnit, I can't find it! This is bad, I'm running out of time! Should I give up and run off leaving things like this!? My conscience hurts just at the thought of the way Emilia-tan was looking at me with all that faith in her eyes… but maybe I don't have a choice?! I'll just have to tell everyone Beatrice has a serious stomachache and couldn't leave the bathroom——]

[——You can't think of any better excuses I suppose, you jerk!?]

As Subaru tore at his head, bemoaning his situation, he was met by the abrupt retort the moment he opened the door.

Before his eyes, the room that was supposed to be the bathroom was instead piled with the kind of paper used for something other than wiping one's butt— In short, it was replaced by a library stuffed full of books. The Forbidden Library, a sight he had grown so used to seeing, yet one he hadn't seen for a long time. Its guardian, a little girl wearing an extravagant dress, sat in front of him as always.

Entering the room, there was a wooden stepladder straight in front of him, and seated on top of it was a girl with a thick book open in her lap.

[Subaru: Beako, found you in the bathroom safe and sound— My instincts aren't half bad if I don't say so myself]

[Beatrice: It's only that I took pity on you, since you won't give up I suppose. And for the sake of Betty's good name, it would be troublesome if you started telling people something strange]

[Subaru: Don't worry about it! Everyone poops, and in an emergency with an upset stomach, not many people would want to respond when they're called. But I shouldn't be saying something so insensitive when you're here straining yourself, sorry!]

[Beatrice: What you just said is already the most insensitive thing in the world I suppose!]

Standing up from her stool, Beatrice was huffing with outright indignation.

Watching her curls thrashing about wildly, Subaru tried to calm her by saying [My bad, my bad], and waving his hands lightly.

[Subaru: Putting that aside, it's been a while. I was looking all over the mansion for you, it's like you wouldn't open up to me at all]

[Beatrice: ……That is how the Door Crossing is supposed to work when I'm paying attention. Even you, if I really tried, you would not be able to enter I suppose]

[Subaru: The fact that you let me in here makes that hard to believe! Tsundere!]

[Beatrice: If I didn't let you in, you'd have gone around threatening me with that scandal!]

After shouting angrily, Beatrice seemed embarrassed by her outburst and wore an awkward expression on her face. Seeing her change in attitude, the corner of Subaru's mouth relaxed a little as he walked up to where she was sitting.

[Subaru: That aside, I'm glad I was able to find you. I'm sorry this is so sudden, but could you get ready to leave? It'll be problematic if you stayed here]

[Beatrice: Betty won't be leaving]

[Subaru: Hah?]

At those abrupt words rejecting his suggestion, Subaru stopped in his steps.

He looked at her, and, looking back at him, she sighed at his dumbfounded expression.

[Beatrice: 'Betty won't be leaving,' that's what I said. I have no intention of leaving the Forbidden Library, or the mansion for that matter I suppose. It would be best if you accept that, and just leave]

[Subaru: Wait a second, you just don't understand the situation right now. You can't stay here, it's too dangerous, so let's go together. I'll tell you everything!]

[Beatrice: Even without you explaining it, I already understand the gist of it I suppose. Also, stop treating me like a child]

Glaring at Subaru, Beatrice reached out towards one of the bookshelves, taking down a book too large for her hands that looked like an illustrated encyclopedia. She returned to her step ladder hugging the book to her chest as she always did, then, she sat down with the book open in her lap as though nothing had changed, as though she really had no intention of leaving.

[Subaru: Oy, come on, don't end the conversation like that, shutting me out all of a sudden]

[Beatrice: There's nothing left for Betty to say I suppose. You are just one-sidedly wanting to continue, and even if you do, my answer won't change. Like me, you have no time to waste either I suppose?]

[Subaru: Guu……If you know that much, then help me out. I'm taking you with me. You're coming with me. Okay?]

[Beatrice: No thanks. It's the same no matter who comes. —Yes, no matter who it is, I won't let them set one foot inside the Forbidden Library I suppose]

Her eyes dropping down to her book, Beatrice's quiet reply was strong and firm. Scratching his head at her stubbornness, Subaru let out a sigh,

[Subaru: Look, I didn't come here this time just to make a fuss, or because Ram has dinner ready. I don't want to say it, but the Witch Cult is coming. They don't discriminate in who they attack, and if I leave you here in the mansion……]

[Beatrice: You should be well acquainted with the power of my Door Crossing ability. And even if anyone dares set foot in here……I won't show them any mercy I suppose]

[Subaru: ——!]

For a moment, Subaru felt the dangerous presence pouring out of Beatrice as she said those words. An icy shiver ran up his back. Sucking in a sharp breath, he realized these were the aftershocks of the waves of magic radiating from her entire body.

The enormity of the Mana flow was such that even Subaru, who has very little experience with magic, could tell how overwhelming it was.

[Subaru: ——! Even so, I am taking you with me]

[Beatrice: That again……]

[Subaru: Whether you are strong or not, it has nothing to do with that! You're a girl, you're little, that's reason enough! I don't want to leave you here where it's dangerous, do I need any other reason?!]

Even being pressured by the might of her aura, Subaru planted his feet firmly on the floor, shouting.

Seeing the man in front of her arguing even more vehemently, Beatrice's eyes opened wide with astonishment. Then, as though enduring something painful, she closed them again.

Subaru furrowed his brows at her response, but still pushed forward intent on taking her with him. Just then,

[Beatrice: Betty, can't go with you. Please, don't confuse things anymore]

[Subaru: I'm not mistaken. You are. ——That's all I have to say]

[Beatrice: You're stubborn I suppose. ——You know, I hate stubbornness]

Beatrice murmured something in a whisper. Uncertain what she said, Subaru was about to ask, but before he could, Beatrice stood up from her stool.

[Beatrice: I see, I suppose, you win. I'll do as you asked, I suppose]

[Subaru: Oh? O-oh, that's good. You understood, that good. For a moment, after you stood up, I was getting ready to get blown out of here flying you know]

[Beatrice: For Betty, blasting you away so only your shadow remains in this world would be too easy……but I won't do something so cruel as that]

Saying something so frightening as though it were nothing, Beatrice returned the book she had taken back into its shelf. Curious at her movements, Subaru realized something and raised his brows. Perhaps it was because she had agreed to go with him that he let his guard down. On a whim, he asked,

[Subaru: By the way, there are tons of books in here, but are you familiar with any languages other than the Yi Ro Ha systems?]

[Beatrice: I was wondering what you would ask all of a sudden……By Yi-Ro-Ha I suppose you mean the alphabets like Yi and the others? Using an expression like that, it is bound to anger the professional linguists]

[Subaru: Yeah yeah, my bad my bad, sorry. But, getting down to business……]

Giving Beatrice, who was glaring sharply at him, a nervous smile, Subaru pulled a single book out of his jacket. The book was bound all in black, and its contents——

[Subaru: Well it's this thing, but all the letters inside are nothing I've ever seen before. I was wondering if you might know……]

[Beatrice: ——I should like to know, why you are holding that right now I suppose]

Suddenly, her rigid voice overpowered Subaru's words, cutting him off. Looking at her, Beatrice's eyes were stretched wide, staring fixedly at the "Gospel" in his hands.

Subaru was surprised by the intensity of her reaction, having only brought up the subject casually.

[Beatrice: I would like to know why you are holding that right now I suppose. Answer me]

[Subaru: Even if this is trash… I took it from that idiot from the Witch Cult. He was treating it with some crazy religious zeal, so I thought it might have some clues written in it]

[Beatrice: Took it? From the Witch Cult? You, of all people……]

Putting a hand to her forehead, slightly swaying back and forth, Beatrice's expression changed. The blood drained from her already pale complexion, Subaru was disconcerted by the way her eyes swam, unfocused.

She seemed as if about to fall over at any moment, so without thinking, Subaru reached out a hand to steady her.

[Subaru: Oy, oy oy, are you okay? If you aren't feeling well, don't push yourself]

[Beatrice: Betty is….it's no good, if that's how things are. But, leaving it in his care……It's unthinkable, but maybe Roswaal has been, until now……?]

[Subaru: Hel—lo—? Sorry to interrupt you when you are looking so serious, but can—you—hear—me—?]

[Beatrice: I am only thinking right now I suppose, so you can just wait for a moment]

Beatrice silenced the worried Subaru with a sharp look, and he calmed down quietly. He closed his mouth as he watched Beatrice shut her eyes, changing her expression.

After some time had passed, and she seemed to remain unresponsive, Subaru opened the Gospel in his hands for the first time in a while, flipping through the pages he still couldn't understand.

Then, he suddenly noticed it.

[Subaru: This book, the latter half is all blank. … But, was this page here before?]

It was written in an unknown alphabet, and the second half was missing pages that seemed to have been ripped out. These two facts hadn't changed. Only, the last page to have writing on it seemed to have had words added to it.

Though he couldn't read it anyway. Perhaps he was just imagining it, there

was no reason to worry about it that much.

[Beatrice: ——That book, what do you plan to do with it I suppose?]

Beatrice, who had been silent for a long time, asked all of a sudden.

Resting her hand against her lips, as if reaching some conclusion to her own mind, Beatrice threw this question at Subaru. [Even if you ask me……] Subaru responded, affected by her demeanor,

[Subaru: Decipher the contents……though I'm not interested in the teachings of the Witch Cult or anything, it's just in case there is any kind of useful information here. Otherwise, I wouldn't want to be carrying around a book that creepy guy cared so much for]

[Beatrice: …..At the very least, Betty can't read what's in there. However, if you don't want to hold on to it, you could entrust its care to me I suppose]

[Subaru: Entrust it?]

[Beatrice: It is a strange book that was once cherished by a strange owner I suppose. If you have any reservations about carrying around a book like that, I could take it off your hands for you]

Beatrice reached out timidly towards him.

From that gesture, he could tell, at the very least, that this wasn't a book she longed to have. These were not the words someone would use if they were

planning on reselling it for a tidy profit.

They were words filled with good intentions. That, and from the way she had been acting, she obviously understood the book was undoubtedly a Gospel. Thus,

[Subaru: Sorry, but I have to reject your offer]

Subaru said, gently pushing Beatrice's extended hand down.

At his words, Beatrice's eyes flickered for only a moment, before her lovely face turned into something stern and heavy.

[Beatrice: Why, I suppose. You instinctively know what an evil thing that is, don't you? At the very least, you realize that it's not something good to be fascinated with I suppose. In that case, rather than hold it yourself, Betty……]

[Subaru: I'm like an evil imp that doesn't want to give something away even if someone wants it so badly, and even if I've no use for it. … I guess that's my stance. Really, that's it]

This book, called a Gospel, seemed to hold a high significance for the disciples of the Witch Cult. Even more, its owner was Betelgeuse, quite a high ranking member of the Witch Cult. Memories of how attached that man was to this book were still fresh in his mind. Even though he had already been captured and debilitated, Subaru was still wary.

[Subaru: It's a book some scary old man might come drooling over to get back. There's no excuse for a guy to give something like that to a little girl just

because it's creepy to hold onto]

[Beatrice: ——!]

[Subaru: If it's dangerous then I'll hang onto it. After all, I'm here to get you to someplace safe you know? Putting you in danger on purpose would be flipping that on its head. Don't treat me like I'm a cold-hearted guy, come on]

Lightly smiling, Subaru placed the book back into his clothes, hiding it from Beatrice's view. He had no idea what was going through her mind as she saw that.

She blinked just once, her lips parting as if to speak.

[Beatrice: ————]

But unable to say anything, her mouth closed again, and she turned her face away.

There was something unnatural in her response, but her expression prevented him from asking about it. Instead, he cracked his neck, and proceeded to change the topic.

[Subaru: Ah, well it's no big deal. For now, since we decided to move I'll leave the preparations to you. Don't bring anything too big, but two or three important books shouldn't be a problem. Maybe two or three sets of clothes as well…]

[Beatrice: ……The library will follow Betty wherever I go. More importantly, you have convinced the other two already I suppose?]

[Subaru: I just heard something really convenient! Yeah, I convinced them alright. You're the only one left. We're all going to evacuate to the Sanctuary, where Roswaal is]

[Beatrice: Roswaal, I suppose… Subaru, what happened to the maid's younger sister that went with you?]

Unexpectedly, Beatrice changed the topic to Rem.

Hearing her suddenly talk about Rem was surprising, and Subaru couldn't help lifting his brows, looking slightly astonished. Realizing this probably wasn't the best response, he tried to relax his expression, saying,

[Subaru: If you're talking about Rem, she's taking care of things in the capital at the moment. We caught this giant fish on the way here, kind of. It was so big, that she had to go back to prepare a really luxurious feast. Once this is all settled, let's all go over there and stuff ourselves]

[Beatrice: You look really happy when you talk about her you know. —Did anything happen?]

[Subaru: Erm]

Hearing Rem's name, Subaru overreacted a little. He couldn't deny that he was talking faster than usual. Beatrice's remark had hit the nail on the head, and Subaru turned his gaze away, whistling nonchalantly.

[Subaru: No, n-nothing happened really]

[Beatrice: Being attended to so tenderly, it would be more strange if no feelings emerged I suppose. Betty won't say anything about it, so you can do as you like]

[Subaru: I, I'm not trying to hide anything you know? Only, it's gonna take a lot of courage to face Emilia-tan and her sister about this so soon……so I guess I'm in kind of a tactical retreat]

Fumbling for words, Subaru pressed his index fingers together and, embarrassed, turned his back to Beatrice with his head sunk down.

It was what it was, and there was truth in Subaru needing courage to bring it up. Surely Emilia wouldn't want to hear him say, all of a sudden, "I will have both you and Rem!" It would be like pouring water in her ears. Though this was his overall plan in the end.

[Subaru: It's a good thing to raise the goal to work towards. That way motivation and effort comes more easily. I don't dislike hard work, you know. Only I haven't really had a plan for the future until now——!]

His excuses puffing him up higher and higher, carried away by his emotions, he was suddenly stopped by an unexpected sensation.

He felt a warmth against his back, followed by arms wrapping around his waist, holding him tightly. They were small, thin arms, and he knew immediately whose they were.

Beatrice.

[Subaru: Oh, it's only Beako. Startled me there. Don't surprise me like that all of a sudden, come on…]

[Beatrice: That response really irritates me I suppose. ——But, it's enough]

[Subaru: Huh?]

Just as he tilted his head at her unexpected words, a sudden bright light blinded him.

Before he realized it, the door opened all on its own,

[Beatrice: Farewell——]

[Subaru: Huh, wh—!?]

The arms that had been holding him let go, and he was pushed forward by an immense pressure from behind. Unable to resist, he began falling forward, sliding towards the door.

This way, as if being sucked through, he flew toward the door—

[Subaru: Beatrice——!]

[Beatrice: Betty……can't go with you]

Twisting himself around, Subaru looked back into the room just before he was swept through the door. The form of the girl caught in his field of view, had large droplets of tears emerging in her eyes.

[Subaru: ————!]

Unable to form any words, his vision twisted. Caught in the shifting spatial dimensions, his body moved down a path that shouldn't exist as the link to the Forbidden Library began to fade.

Just like that, Subaru's body was flung from the space of the Forbidden Library, disappearing some place far away.

[Beatrice: ——other]

Watching this unfold, Beatrice shut the door that had been left open.

There was a sound of space ripping apart, followed by the deep silence that descended once again upon the Forbidden Library.

[Beatrice: ——Mother]

In a small voice, as though about to cry, Beatrice called to that name. The large droplets of tears had already disappeared from her eyes, though her expression remained.

[Beatrice: Just…… how much more…… must Betty……]

About to break down crying, Beatrice walked back to her stepladder, laying down all her weight onto it. She reached out her arm behind the ladder——from a shelf that was usually behind her, she took down a book, and hugged it close.

[Beatrice: Mother…Mother……Mother……!]

Like a child, lost, clinging tightly to the book pressed against her chest, Beatrice's quiet cries resounded through the Forbidden Library.

The book in her embrace, bound all in black, never responded.

++++++++++++++++++

When later, Subaru died, ambushed by the Witch Cult, all this was lost.

Except, like so many things, he, alone, still remembers it.

This was a scene from a loop that was cut from the Anime, taking place around Episode 22. It is basically 2/3rd of Arc 3 Chapter 71. We included this as a Prelude to Chapter 3 because this conversation has a huge impact on how Subaru confronts Beatrice in Chapter 3.

Only Subaru remembers this, because after being thrown out by Beatrice, Subaru was killed on the way to the Sanctuary, ending that loop and everything that happened in it.

Chapter 03 [Reunion and Passing]

——Slowly, focusing only on turning the doorknob in his hand, Subaru held his breath.

He had a feeling this was the one.

Quietly wandering through the mansion like this, he'd all of a sudden notice a door that particularly draws his attention.

Leaving Emilia and the others behind in the living room, having been granted a little bit of time, Subaru wandered through the mansion alone, and found it just as he set foot into the hallway on the second floor.

The moment he touched the doorknob, his suspicion turned into conviction, and as he started to push it open, there was not a single doubt in his mind.

And, taking in the existence of "that room", in that place, at that very moment, he stepped inside,

[Subaru: Hey, it's been a while]

The Forbidden Library, just as he remembered it, stretched out in front of his eyes.

The little girl, who is the master of that dimly lit room, hadn't changed a bit

either—— Sitting on a stepladder like it's a makeshift chair, she was in the middle of leafing through a book.

[Beatrice: ——The mansion was noisy today, I figured you returned I suppose]

Her eyes lifted for a moment to take Subaru into her gaze. ——However, after muttering as if she was bored, she immediately lost interest, and dropped her eyes back into her book.

[Beatrice: If you're back, that means Nii-cha must be back as well. I sense that girl, and a few other annoying insects as well I suppose]

[Subaru: Puck hasn't shown up yet, he's recharging his batteries I think. Ah, I don't like how you talk about Emilia-tan like she's in the same category you know! Though I don't mind the part about Otto]

[Beatrice: You're really noisy]

Beatrice huffed her nose at Subaru's smalltalk, and rearranged her legs under her extravagant dress. Seeing that, Subaru continued to walk closer, stringing words together as he did so.

[Subaru: But it sure has been a long time since I saw you. Since that time with Bete… Ah, wait, that didn't happen… the last time was before I left for the Capital wasn't it? It's about ten days now…]

[Beatrice: Not long at all I suppose. While Betty is in this room, the flow of time outside really doesn't matter that much]

[Subaru: And there you are saying strange things again, geez. Also, when you're talking with someone, you really shouldn't have your nose buried in a book you know! Seeing me again after ten days, I'd understand if you're so happy that you want to hide your blush but still…]

[Beatrice: I can make your mouth spit blood instead of noise until you turn pale in the face, you know]

At the girl's unhidden annoyance, Subaru loosened the tension in his face.

Whenever he comes to talk with the girl guarding the Forbidden Library, Subaru couldn't help but want to do things to poke at her stubborn attitude and mess up that deadpan expression of hers.

Cracking jokes and clowning around, annoying her until she gets really pissed off, then keep prodding her until she finally couldn't stand it anymore and throws him out.

There is a part of himself that thoroughly enjoys those exchanges. But just why does he always have this feeling towards her, he isn't quite sure if he knows.

[Beatrice: I take the fact that you've returned as a sign that the recent disturbances around here have settled, I suppose]

[Subaru: You noticed…… Well that's only natural I guess. Emilia and Ram ran around all over the mansion looking for you, you know? It would be nice to apologize to them later]

[Beatrice: Betty? Apologize? To whom, and for what, I can't imagine why I should do such a thing]

Huffing with her perfectly formed nose, Beatrice closed her book with a loud clap, and rose from her seat on the stepladder. Then, putting the thickly bound book back onto its shelf, on tip-toes, she stretched as hard as she could to reach for the one right next to it.

Seeing she was having trouble getting it out, Subaru walked up beside her.

[Subaru: This one? Here]

[Beatrice: ……No, it's the one next to it I suppose. If you're trying to give help that people haven't asked for, at least try to help them correctly]

[Subaru: Such a thankful loli… Oy, careful not to drop it. You will get hurt if this brick falls on your toes]

As Subaru was pulling out the book with one hand, he found it surprisingly heavy. Once he had carefully handed it over to her, Beatrice accepted it, hugging it to her chest. Subaru briefly tried to read the title, but as someone who could barely understand anything beyond the "Yi" alphabets, it was too far beyond Subaru's ability to comprehend.

[Beatrice: I don't think I will thank you I suppose]

[Subaru: I know you're trying to follow the tsundere path and all, but frankly, you saying that and you just straight up saying "Thank you" pretty much carry the same meaning at this point]

At least, the fact that she'd acknowledge that his actions would be generally considered worthy of thanks, was in itself a testament to her good will.

In response to Subaru's retort, Beatrice frowned and turned her face to the side. Seeing her obstinate attitude, Subaru scratched his head,

[Subaru: I don't mind if you never thank me until the end of time, but make sure to at least thank those two, ok? They were really worried, leaving you behind in the mansion]

[Beatrice: It's not like I ever asked them to…]

[Subaru: Don't say something lame like that. Most people never asked to be born but are born anyway, and even if you don't want people to worry about you they will still worry. ……And that second part is only true when you have kind hearted people around you]

There was no need to specify that Emilia and Ram were that kind of people. Emilia's everyday way of life pretty much gives her a good-person score of 100 out of 100, although Ram's score would probably go into negative numbers, how she is on the inside is a different matter.

Regardless, Beatrice didn't show any sign of agreeing with him. Instead, turning away, she bit her lip slightly and said,

[Beatrice: But in the end, they still left the mansion I suppose…… without Betty]

[Subaru: What do you mean? Are you trying to say you didn't want to be left behind? You cut yourself off with that Hikikomori Door spell, far away, would it have been too troublesome to come out yourself?]

[Beatrice: It's "Door Crossing". Don't change it to a ridiculous name like that I suppose. Besides, such a suggestion is insulting to Betty]

Without acknowledging Subaru's words, Beatrice continued facing to the side, her obstinate attitude unbroken. He sensed this time there was something different, and dangerous, beyond her usual act. Subaru furrowed his brows and didn't know what to do.

With her acting like this even before they'd started talking about what he had actually come here to ask her, he wondered how he could bring it up now. Even so, perhaps he still had one more trick up his sleeve to lift up her mood……

[Subaru: Oh well. If you're going to be that stubborn, I'll just tell Emilia-tan that you wouldn't stop repeating "thank you" with tears of gratitude streaming from your eyes]

[Beatrice: You shouldn't make up lies?! It's been a very long time since I last shed a tear I suppose]

[Subaru: What, you're saying you're too embarrassed to cry? If you say that kind of thing while you're still a kid, you're gonna find it hard to express your emotions when you grow up you know? Kids shouldn't worry about what other people think and just cry when they're sad]

[Beatrice: I have some reservations listening to this coming from a man who

cried his heart out on the lap of the woman he likes]

[Subaru: Can't you please forget about that!?]

Perhaps Emilia herself knew not to remind Subaru of this embarrassing history.

He was acting like an idiot to distract himself from the dread he carried deep inside his heart, unconsciously building up an increasingly unsustainable dam.

Lying on Emilia's lap, all this collapsed, and all the emotions he had been bottling up ever since first being summoned to this world came rushing out in a flood of tears.

Reminded of that time again, his face felt like it was about to burst into flame. Although, along with that heat, deep within his heart he also felt a radiant light shining from that memory.

Scratching at his cheek, while trying to redo the seal on that particular memory, Subaru snuck a quick glance at Beatrice. Looking bored as always, she had sat back down on the stepladder with the book Subaru had retrieved for her. She had just slowly started letting her eyes run over its contents.

She was clearly trying to shut off any further conversation, but if he were to let her do that, there would be no meaning in him coming here in the first place.

[Subaru: Anyway, putting crying or not aside…… I have something I want to ask you, is that ok?]

[Beatrice: You're free to ask I suppose]

Within her reply, accompanied by the sound of a page turning over in her book, there was the unspoken message "whether I answer or not is another story". There was no indication of cooperation from her, but at least she gave him permission to ask. Subaru quietly mumbled [alright then] under his breath and, intending to breach the subject of his visit——.

[Subaru: ——Come to think of it, considering all that commotion was going on outside, wasn't your reaction kind of lacking?]

However, what came out of his mouth didn't carry the meaning he had intended, and instead only served to reignite the conversation he had just tried to close off.

Hearing Subaru's words, Beatrice raised her eyes from her book. Sensing his reflection within her clear, immaculate gaze, Subaru sucked in a small breath,

[Subaru: Wh… while you were sitting in here acting like nothing was happening, it was getting pretty crazy outside you know? This strange group of guys had the mansion surrounded, and……]

[Beatrice: Stop it]

[Subaru: If I hadn't somehow managed to bring back reinforcements with me from the Capital, you have no idea what would have happened. And, it's not like it was easy for me to make my way back here……]

[Beatrice: I really want you to stop now I suppose]

[Subaru: It was actually a journey so rough, if I were to tell it to you, both you and I would be in tears by the end, but having finally cleared that hurdle……!]

With a loud, cracking noise, Subaru's rant was forcibly cut off.

Looking around, the source of the sound was the book Beatrice had been holding in her hands, which she had slammed shut with all her strength. Subaru tried to understand Beatrice's expression, and her intentions, but she turned to face him with a sharp and merciless glare, and said,

[Beatrice: How about you say what you actually came here to say, you spineless coward]

[Subaru: ……yeah]

He couldn't deny it.

She was right, and had clearly seen through Subaru's attempt to run away. To run away from the answer to the question he knew he had to ask.

[Subaru: Do you…]

Gulping down his breath, he squeezed shut his eyes, listening to the beating of his heart.

Beyond his closed eyelids, he saw her sweet smile, smiling back at him.

[Subaru: Do you… remember Rem?]

——His question became sound and, having exploded into reality, could no longer be taken back.

In the loops after the slaying of the White Whale, Subaru had only spoken to Beatrice once in the Forbidden Library.

The purpose of that conversation was to convince her to escape from the Witch Cult, but she refused, and in the end, the girl was left in the mansion all alone.

While he could no longer remember everything they had discussed, looking back, there was one fact that he could not miss.

Beatrice, at that point in time, had asked him about Rem, who was supposed to have returned with him.

By that time, the handwritten letter had already turned blank when it reached the Mansion.

In other words, the conversation took place after Rem had been attacked by the Sin Archbishops, and Beatrice, who had never seemed to care much about Rem up to that point, had suddenly asked about her——

[Subaru: Answer me. Do you remember Rem who used to live in this mansion?]

He wanted her to remember. She must remember. Thinking this, Subaru's voice distorted toward the end.

The depths of his memories confirmed this, and his ever weakening heart, so close to sinking, to drowning, yearning to be revived, would not deny this.

Beatrice silently stared at Subaru.

Within her pupils, there was neither feeling nor emotion. What she was thinking was impossible to read.

Normally, she was a girl whose emotions are easy to understand, but at this moment, Subaru could not pick up anything at all. His teeth itched, it was as if time stood still, and Subaru's heart was burning down to ashes.

[Subaru: Hey……]

Why don't you say anything.

You either remember, or you don't, it's not a difficult question to answer…

…Of course, there was only one answer he wanted to hear. That Beatrice remembers Rem, and that she would laugh at the sheer stupidity of his question.

Memories eaten, name swallowed, removed from the world, what a stupid

notion that is.

Let her feel as he feels, let her feel that same indignation at the cruel outrageousness of this World. Or, even if they could just share the common reality of her existence, perhaps they would find the solution together, and that would be enough.

So, tell me you know her.

Like Emilia, like Crusch, like Wilhelm, like all the others, Rem—— don't tell me you have forgotten her.

Wanting to hear her answer. Dreading to hear her answer. Agitation, contradiction, his emotions wrenched and twisted.

Then, to Subaru's faltering, convulsing heart, Beatrice spoke

[Beatrice: ——I don't want to answer]

She turned her gaze away from Subaru, answering neither yes or no.

Losing his breath with a "Ha", for an instant, Subaru's mind stopped. Then bewilderedly flinging his arms in the air

[Subaru: Wa, wait. What do you mean you don't want to answer? Doesn't that question only have the answers YES or NO?]

[Beatrice: I don’t know what you mean by ‘*yes*’or ‘*nō*’ I suppose. And my answer will never change. I don’t want to answer]

[Subaru: I’M SAYING THAT ISN’T AN ANSWER!]

Swinging his arms down, Subaru stepped forward furiously.

The girl sitting on the stepladder did not even glance at his intense gesture, and only firmly closed her lips. Seeing her obstinate attitude, flames engulfed his chest, impossible to stop.

[Subaru: Those are not the words I want to hear from you!]

[Beatrice: Why does Betty have to answer in words you want to hear I suppose? ……Stop making a fuss. The Library will get disordered I suppose]

[Subaru: You……!]

Subaru stormed toward Beatrice.

The face that did not even want to look at him, Subaru wanted to force it around and ask her face to face how could she say something so heartless. But,

[Subaru:————]

The moment he was about to touch her, Beatrice looked at Subaru.

And then, in that instant, her eyes filled with waves of emotion, Subaru's hand stopped. Because it was as if she——

[Beatrice: That question of yours, are words querying about someone eaten by 'Gluttony']

[Subaru: ——! So, you……]

[Beatrice: This sort of thing, if one is familiar with the Authority of Gluttony, is not difficult to deduce I suppose. Roswaal too, and Nii-cha, and Shaula would all know this as well]

[Subaru: Ros…!?]

An unexpected name flying out, Subaru's throat clogged up.

Roswaal knowing the Authority of Gluttony —— does that mean there might be a chance that he remembers Rem? No but before that,

[Subaru: How much do you guys know about the Witch's Cult? Even Roswaal should have known, that once Emilia's identity as a Half-Elf was known to the public, the Witch Cult would start taking action. Yet, if I didn't do anything, the Mansion and the village would all have been destroyed. What is going on?]

[Beatrice: ……]

[Subaru: There is no way he didn't plan anything, that was what Rem and Crusch-san told me. Yet, it looks to me like he didn't prepare for anything at all,

because if he did, how could it have end up so catastrophically…]

[Beatrice: Betty doesn't know how much Roswaal has thought about it I suppose. But…… I don't think Roswaal would have thought nothing on it]

Listening to Beatrice's statement, Subaru narrowed his brows, trying to pick out some indication of Roswaal's preparations at work during the battle against Betelgeuse. Yet, no matter how much Subaru searched through his memories, he couldn't find anything of the sort.

[Subaru: Is it a misconception? Or are we overestimating his capabilities? If Roswaal did something, then why was I faced with so much trouble……]

[Beatrice: If you don't know, then no one could possibly know]

Her sigh carried a color of disappointment, Beatrice seemed to have given up on his lack of understanding. Even though he was displeased by her attitude, Subaru noticed the conversation had strayed off the topic.

[Subaru: Wait, compared to that, if you know something about the Witch Cult, tell me everything. About the Sin Archbishops, about 'Gluttony', there's a mountain of things I want to ask you…… and this too]

One after another, Subaru wanted to ask Beatrice everything.

Subaru put his hand into his jacket, and took out a book with black binding.

The book, dirtied with black-ish blood on the cover and partially on the inside,

was the loot he received after a fierce battle against a formidable opponent, several days ago.

[Subaru: I know this thing is a really important and deep part of the Witch Cult… I can't read what's inside, but as the guardian of the Forbidden Library you might know something……]

[Beatrice: ——A Gospel]

Looking at the book in Subaru's hands, Beatrice's eyes opened wide.

Her peach-colored lips trembled, staring at the Gospel with a frozen gaze.

The illegible words written on the cover — she skimmed over them, and with an incredulous expression,

[Beatrice: Why do you, of all people, have……]

[Subaru: I plundered it, but it's not that I actually wanted it, you know. Like I said, the Witch Cult had the mansion surrounded. So I took it off of their leader. The owner……. doesn't exist in this world anymore]

[Beatrice: Took it…….but, that]

Beatrice's voice quivered, as she reached out her hands for the Gospel held by Subaru.

Though he hesitated, seeing Beatrice's small fingers trembling, Subaru slowly placed the Gospel in her hands. Receiving the book, as if checking, she traced her finger over the mysterious letters on the front cover, and

[Beatrice: Its owner…… died, you said, I suppose?]

[Subaru: ……Yeah. He's dead. He got engulfed by the carriage wheels and …… I killed him]

All things considered, Betelgeuse wasn't directly killed by Subaru.

But still, everything from the reason, the circumstances, to the events leading up to the reality of his demise, were all inevitable extensions of Subaru's actions.

Subaru wanted to kill Betelgeuse, for if he didn't take that man's life in a duel to the death, in his Soul, he would never be able to forgive himself.

Therefore, Subaru had no reservations about his intention to murder Betelgeuse.

But even without reservations, it could not be said that dirtying his hands did not leave him with any regrets. He could not pretend it didn't affect him, nor would his heart lie for him on this matter.

The fact that he killed Betelgeuse, and had once been killed by Betelgeuse as well, he will never be able to forget.

For as long as he lives, he will be carrying the life he took from that man——

but these sentiments did not come out of Subaru's mouth.

Betelgeuse was an existence that deserved to die, and Subaru, believing this, murdered him.

That's all.

But, to all these thoughts carried within his words, Beatrice did not show any reaction.

She only quietly murmured [I see……], keeping her eyes dropped down at the Gospel in her hands,

[Beatrice: So even you went leaving Betty, huh, Juice……]

[Subaru: ——? Who is that?]

[Beatrice: There is no need for you to know. What happened to the 'Witch Gene', if you have killed 'Sloth' I suppose?]

[Subaru: Witch, gene……?]

At Beatrice's question, Subaru wrinkled his brows and tilted his head.

Seeing this gesture from Subaru, Beatrice's expression was one of bafflement, and she narrowed her eyes as if trying to read Subaru's emotions from his expression. But, searching, her gaze could not find what it was looking for.

Subaru clicked his tongue in agitation,

[Subaru: Tch, don't use professional terminologies on a guy who doesn't know anything about the situation, come on. What is that, 'Witch Gene'? Ugh sounds wonderful already]

[Beatrice: You don't know……? Wait, seriously? Then, for what reason did you kill 'Sloth' I suppose? I don't understand]

[Subaru: I was just getting rid of falling sparks! What are you trying to tell me!]

The conversation that just doesn't seem to mesh is straining Subaru's patience, but unlike Subaru, who was trying to force the pace, Beatrice is getting closer and closer to a complete silence. Placing the back of her hand against her lips, as if in deep thought, she only continued gazing at the front cover of the book,

[Beatrice: I, don't know. ……This is beyond Betty's ability to decide]

[Subaru: What are you trying to decide alone ——hey]

Shaking her head, Beatrice threw the Gospel at Subaru.

Quickly catching the thrown book, Subaru breathed a small sigh of relief and,

[Subaru: What are you doing all of a sudden. I'm not saying it's dangerous, but it is still an eerie book. Handle it more carefully!]

[Beatrice: ——You should hold onto it, I suppose. What would the Witch Gene choose, or not choose… Either way, a decision will be forced. When that time comes, if it helps you in your decision, Juice would be able to pass on peacefully too, I suppose]

[Subaru: What do you mean a beverage passing on! You're……!]

Nothing at all, Subaru understood none of it as he clung to the incomprehensible words. But, before Subaru could say anything, there was a strange feeling forming behind him.

——There was the sound of space being bent by an unnatural force. Subaru instinctively understood, though he didn't know why he knew this,

[Subaru: Are you going to kick me out? I haven't been able ask you anything yet…… You want me to leave with just this, seriously!?]

[Beatrice: The answers you want to hear, and the words you want to hear — why must Betty say them I suppose? Selfish…… Stop being Prideful]

[Subaru: Pri……! ——Just tell me, I want to know! I won't ask for any more! So, please…]

[Beatrice: ——Betty is…]

All the hair of his back stood on end —— for they were being physically drawn backwards by a force pulling Subaru's entire body back.

Space was distorting —— only when he turned his head to look behind him, he saw that the door which was supposed to be shut, had been opened, and he knew that the space of absolute darkness shall soon engulf him.

No wind was blowing, nor were his legs or arms being grabbed by anything.

Only, there was an indescribable pressure all over his body from the front, and a gravitational force invisible to naked eyes from the rear, as if embracing him, pulling him away.

—Absolute and forceful, it was the true form of Door Crossing.

[Subaru: Beako…… Beatrice!]

[Beatrice: What is trying to get out is your body, and your soul]

[Subaru: What are you—]

[Beatrice: Your heart doesn’t want to hear the true answers, because of your weakness your gaze avoids reality, and your selfish mind does not want to look at your own Sins. All this, distances your body further from this Forbidden Library]

But,

[Subaru: I——]

[Beatrice: Betty is not… a convenient tool for you]

[Subaru: ——!?]

[Beatrice: What you want to hear, when you want to hear it, in words you want to hear, in the way you want to hear it…… I am not a convenient existence, like that]

As these words wrenched through Beatrice’s lips, Subaru could not pronounce another syllable.

They penetrated deep, and pierced the mark, and completely unprepared, Subaru was mauled by those word into speechless astonishment.

Then, as void emerged, Subaru’s body’s resistance collapsed, and

[Subaru: Cra——]

This way, as if being sucked into the door behind him, Subaru’s body was pulled toward the Door Crossing.

If he goes through, he would be kicked out of the Library. At the last moment, Subaru grabbed the edge of the door, and as his other half was about to swing out, he stomped onto the other end.

Panting, clenching his teeth tightly, he looked up—— in front, there was a girl with an expression full of sorrow.

[Beatrice: If you have something you want to know, ask Roswaal. ——Nii-cha or Betty, won't say anything to you]

[Subaru: ……Why are you, almost crying]

At Subaru's final query, Beatrice cast down her eyes, and did not respond.

At last, the girl extended her fingertips and wrapped them around Subaru's fingers on the door——and took them off.

Sucked in. Thrown off. Locked out.

To the door, from the Forbidden Library —— by the heart of a girl named Beatrice.

[Subaru: ————]

Sliding through, the door vomited him out and sent him flying into the hallway.

In front of his eyes, the door that threw him out closed up violently, seeing this Subaru extended out his hand to the flap, but it was too late.

[Subaru: That Drill Loli……]

The other side of the door was not the Forbidden Library, only another unused guest room.

He looked around at the Mansion, but couldn't feel the sixth-sense which connects him to the Forbidden Library.

——Today, he can't meet her anymore.

This realization fell on Subaru's heart.

What he wanted to hear, what he wanted to know, rather than that, he was only turned round and round by the girl's mystifying words, and kicked out before gaining anything.

[Subaru: What the hell! If you know something, then cough it up, you stingy brat! You mopey shut-in-hikikomori! Which son of the Natsuki-family do you think you are?]

Subaru kicked at the door which up until a few moments ago had been connected to the Forbidden Library, and let out a long sigh.

Shaking his head, he tried to forget the image in his mind — The last thing he saw at the time of their parting, Beatrice's expression, would not leave him.

But, surely she was…

[Subaru: With a face almost crying like that, stop shutting yourself in all alone, stupid]

Thinking it was his fault that she had that expression on her face, and having accomplished nothing, he could not blame her at all.

Chapter 04 [The Next Place]

——After Beatrice ejected him from the Forbidden Library, Subaru returned to everyone in the living room empty handed, looking rather ashamed of himself.

Awaiting him, the living room was the same as when he left. The only difference was that Otto was now sitting in Subaru's seat, and seemed to have just finished discussing something with Emilia.

Putting on a face that left no doubt in anyone's mind just how much he resented another guy talking to Emilia in anything vaguely resembling an intimate way, Subaru headed towards Otto.

[Subaru: I see you're happily chatting with Emilia-tan while I was gone, it would be nice if you go and drop dead now]

[Otto: It's not in my nature to just sit around silently and let time pass… More importantly, what kind of sane person says a line like that immediately after coming back!? It's very unpleasant when you always take your anger out on me you know!]

[Subaru(girly voice): D-don't talk like you can understand! As soon as I buy your oil and fulfill my promise, it's all over between us, we're through! So don't get the wrong idea here!]

[Otto: Could you please not talk like there's something between us that might cause a misunderstanding!?]

In the short span of time it took Otto to yell at him for being a tsundere, Subaru, as if suddenly completely losing interest, turned towards Emilia.

Kept out of the conversation, she was clearly waiting for him and Otto to finish talking, and seeing him looking at her, she looked back up at him and asked,

[Emilia: ——Were you able to meet with Beatrice?]

A surprisingly difficult question. On the one hand, the answer to her question was YES, but the answer to the question she was actually asking was closer to a NO.

While he had been able to make contact with her, he hadn't actually broached the most essential topic. He almost wanted to laugh at what a limp, indecisive, cowardly Adventure RPG protagonist he was.

[Subaru: No, it just wasn't happening]

[Emilia: Oh… Oh well, I guess that was to be expected. When Beatrice hides using 'Door Crossing', I guess there's no way to find her. Neither Ram nor I have managed to meet her after all, so…]

[Subaru: Ehm, actually, I did manage to find her. But she was, how should I say this… I guess she was in a bad mood, a bit mopey… Anyway, I wasn't able to get an answer from her. Stupid, right?]

[Emilia: You… found her?]

Having thought that he'd never been able to make contact with her in the first place, Emilia's eyes widened in astonishment. A bit surprised by her reaction, Subaru let out an "Ah?" and nodded his head.

[Emilia: I've been thinking this for a while, but… You and Beatrice are actually really close, aren't you?]

Emilia murmured in a low voice, lightly touching her lower lip with her finger as though pondering something.

In response, Subaru put on his best disapproving frown, working hard to further improve the expression that was shaping his face into something no one could misinterpret.

[Subaru: Me and Beako, friends? Please… She's like my arch-nemesis, ever since the moment we met. The first time we met she sucked out all of my Mana you know!? I don't think there's enough time left in the world for that horrible first impression to go away!]

[Emilia: Even though you made up with Julius? After all that happened between you? Subaru you're like this sometimes, being stubborn in a reeeaally meaningless way]

[Subaru: Being meaninglessly stubborn is the measure of a man! I'm the kind of guy who continues to carry around that kind of stupid idea, even though I know it's a bunch of crap. Plus, I HAVEN'T made up with Julius. I, hate, that guy, FOR-EH-VAR]

[Emilia: Sure, sure]

Emilia lightly brushed aside his disingenuous objections with a small laugh. Seeing this, Subaru screwed up his face to show his dissatisfaction. However, on the inside, he just felt relieved that the subject had been laid to rest.

He still hadn't had time to process his conversation with Beatrice. The sad expression on her face at the very end, he had no idea of how to even begin to make sense of it.

[Subaru: By the way, where's Frederica gone off too? How could her good judgment be so lacking that she would leave my Emilia-tan and Otto alone together…]

[Emilia: Setting aside the matter of me supposedly belonging to anyone for another time… Frederica has gone off to prepare one of the guest rooms… Since we're going to need a place for Rem-san to rest]

[Subaru: Ah, I see]

Subaru responded in a low whisper. Emilia, looking pained, narrowed her eyes.

While he hated himself for causing this expression on her face, he simply couldn't hold back the rending pain filling up his chest every time he was reminded of Rem.

However, with a blink and a shake of his head, he extinguished the grief from his expression to keep his pain from extending to Emilia. Relaxing his lips he said,

[Subaru: In that case, I better get Rem from the dragon carriage. She shouldn't be lying out there all alone…… Oh, sorry about what I said before, Otto]

[Otto: No, no, I don't blame you. After all, I sense that…… a lot has happened between her and Natsuki-san. I can hardly ask you to have your emotions in check given the circumstances]

[Subaru: It's just that when I think of you touching my Rem with your dirty, money-grubbing hands, I can't help myself…… I'm really sorry]

[Otto: There's no way you'd say something like that if you were really sorry! I also really don't think that's a line a person who just labelled a totally different girl as his should be saying!!]

[Subaru: That's just me using you in my plan to make Emilia-tan fall jealously in love with me. Don't make me say it out loud, idiot]

[Otto: You said that out loud all on your own!!]

Grinning at Otto's reliably explosive reaction, Subaru snuck a glance at Emilia's face. Having been intently observing their exchange, Emilia's lips seemed to soften just a little, and the sorrow of moments ago had all disappeared. Confirming this, Subaru drew a small sigh of relief.

[Emilia: Subaru and Otto-kun seem to be reeaally close. Even though you only met just recently…]

[Subaru: Huh, that's what you got jealous at!? Compared to my feelings for you, Otto is just a toy, a plaything on the side! I want a real and passionate relationship with you, Emilia-tan!]

[Otto: Why am I the one being discarded!? Even though this whole thing has no basis in reality, I still really don't like that!!]

Seeing the two guys heat up more and more, Emilia suddenly burst out laughing. Covering her mouth with her hand, her shoulders shuddering with laughter, Emilia managed to squeeze out an [I'm sorry] before she was finally able to continue.

[Emilia: I don't think this is the kind of situation where I should be laughing like this, but I just can't help myself… Are you sure you two haven't actually known each other for a really long time?]

[Subaru: He's a travelling merchant you know? Once his business is over, he'll be out of here before you know it…… Actually, just the thought of an un-shipped male character other than myself coming near Emilia-tan, aaah I can't stand it!]

[Otto: I don't know what that is, but in the short time I've gotten to know you I can already tell it's probably something really awful so I don't like it——!]

Seeing Otto putting his hands on his head with a somewhat traumatized expression on his face, Subaru snorted loudly, twisting his mouth.

In a way, those exaggerations were actually his true feelings. Ever since baring his heart to Emilia, Subaru chased her with an air of indomitable invincibility, and his heart is set ablaze with jealousy whenever another guy approaches her.

This is surely because the depth of his possessiveness, and jealousy, are both many times that of any normal person.

The rampant conversation in the living room was coming to an end just as Frederica returned from preparing the guest room.

[Otto: I was thinking, I'd like to check on how things are in the village nearby. Since I'm holding onto the certificates for the other merchants regarding the purchasing of their cargo, I can, to an extent, take care of distributing things to the village. Though I'll get the Margrave to pay for the costs later, of course]

After saying this, as if the fatigue from the long trip did not affect him at all, Otto hustled off towards the village.

No matter how much he showed the face of a calculative merchant, his proposal was, as 60% of the evacuees had not yet returned, nothing short of aid and support for the still nonfunctional Arlam village.

Watching Otto hide all this behind a money-hungry demeanor, Subaru was forced to quickly cover up his sense of gratitude by pretending to spit on the ground.

[Frederica: I have prepared a room in the servants quarters as instructed. … Strangely, there was only one room that appeared to have been thoroughly cleaned]

[Subaru: Thoroughly cleaned…… The innermost room on the second floor?]

[Frederica: —Yes, that's right. Only that room seemed clean, as if everything had been thrown out except the bed… Do you, know something about it?]

As Frederica spoke of the room she had just prepared, Subaru struggled hard to keep his grief from emerging in his eyes.

The room she talked about——the innermost room on the Mansion's second floor in the eastern wing, was the room Rem had used. Hearing the explanation that everything in the room must have been tidied up, Subaru deeply felt the overwhelming power of "Gluttony"'s Authority: the eradication of existence.

[Subaru: ……No. I just had a hunch; there's no real meaning behind it]

Frederica, who saw the truth behind Subaru's words, didn't say a thing.

She too, seemed to possess an extraordinarily excellent disposition as a maid.

Most likely, Rem and Frederica were the two who had kept Roswaal's overly-spacious mansion functioning. Excepting Ram.

Going around back of the Mansion, a soft snorting sound greeted Subaru as he headed towards the dragon carriage.

Looking at where the carriage was parked, he saw an unfamiliar building that looked like a storehouse——most likely it was the place used to shelter dragon carriages, like a garage.

He saw the building, and Patrasche stabled in the adjacent barn.

The ground dragon with jet black skin let out a valiant cry, extending her neck

out towards the approaching Subaru in a gesture of tenderness.

Placing a fingertip against the approaching nostrils, he tickled the rough skin.

[Subaru: Sorry I never thanked you properly, Patrasche. A lot of things happened, and I know it's late, but, I'm counting on you from here on out too, partner]

[Patrashe: ……]

In answer to Subaru's words, Patrasch licked the palm of his hand with her rough tongue. Looking at their friendly exchange, Frederica tilted her head.

[Frederica: She really cherishes you. One look, and anyone could tell she is a competent ground dragon, yet to see how tamed she is…it's astounding]

[Subaru: I haven't done anything close to taming her? If normal ground dragons are difficult to pet and hug, then I guess it's just because Patrasche has a deeper emotional capacity than the others. Or, maybe I'm just so incapable, she can't leave me be]

It's not like Subaru was being humble, it was simply the only way he could appraise Patrasche's lovableness.

Within just 3, 4 days from meeting her, how many times had he had his life saved by this softhearted ground dragon.

Conversely, Subaru hadn't done anything for her in return yet. He couldn't help but think his meeting with this ground dragon was nothing short of a

blessing.

As though understanding Subaru's self-assessment, Patrasche extended her head, which was licking Subaru's hands, and rubbed her muzzle against the inattentive Subaru's cheek. Surprised at the sudden offensive, Subaru smiled wryly at the raspy sensation on his face.

[Frederica: I, think I understood what kind of person Subaru-sama is. —You, have your own hardships]

[Subaru: ……]

Instead of Subaru, who had his hands full with Patrasche, Frederica's words and kind gaze were directed at Patrasche, who was frolicking with him.

Patrasche stopped her movements for a moment at the deep emotion behind Frederica's words, looking at her with the pupils of a reptile, before resuming her toying of Subaru.

In that moment, the women somehow understood each other, and Subaru was completely unaware.

Anyways,

[Subaru: Sorry for making you wait, Rem. I'm sure it was cramped and dark, right? I'm gonna carry you to your room now, okay?]

After spending some time playing with Patrasche, he headed for where the

dragon carriage was parked——in other words, to where Rem had been left sleeping.

There was no change, Rem was still in a deep sleep. She didn't raise any objections.

Sulking at being left behind, her head turned away, cheeks puffed out…saying "Subaru-kun is so mean!", or laughing at Subaru's apology—none of it will happen.

[Frederica: —I heard about it earlier, but still I am surprised]

From behind Subaru, who was immersed in nostalgia, Frederica, who saw Rem for the first time, was unable to hide her surprise. When Subaru tilted his head at Frederica's surprised response, she quietly shook her head.

[Frederica: Nothing. It is just, her face looks very similar to the Ram I know. The only difference I see is the color of the hair… twins, as you said]

[Subaru: I'm sure it must be hard to believe, what with losing your memories and all, but I'm glad you believed me. It would make me glad if you remembered her, without thinking it was some kind of cruel joke]

Nodding at the reason for Frederica's surprise, Subaru stretched his palm out to touch Rem's cheek.

Somehow, he felt no warmth nor coldness. There was no doubt all her life-functions were active, but there was nothing left living within her.

Confirming what he had already checked countless times, Subaru again received an incurable wound to the depths of his heart. Even knowing this, he

still could not help but check.

[Frederica: Subaru-sama. It would be fine for me to carry…]

[Subaru: I want to do it. Please let me. I want to be the one that takes Rem to the Mansion… to her room. Sorry I'm being selfish]

[Frederica: Not at all, it's really touching. Your eyes look like those of a murderer, but you are kind, I see]

[Subaru: I also have a heart that gets damaged from such casual dissing!]

Responding to Frederica's words, Subaru wrapped Rem up in his arms. He has carried her several times now to move her, but even so he was reminded of how light she was.

It was with this body she had stood in front of him, fighting hard to protect his useless self. The more he dwelt on this, the more his feelings of just how precious she is swelled up.

[Subaru: I'll wake you, as soon as I can. So, please, scold me angrily for feeling the softness of your body with these fingertips of mine]

[Frederica: It was such a good line, until you had to go and ruin it.]

Subaru exited the dragon carriage, leaving Frederica's disgruntled words behind him.

He nodded a quick goodbye to Patrasche, who had poked her head out of the stables. Subaru then entered the mansion, led by Frederica.

Led to the Eastern Maid's room——The bedroom, the room that once was Rem's.

[Frederica: You talked, with Beatrice-sama]

The statement was thrown out abruptly, as they walked.

Subaru, who had been carefully going up the stairs, looked up at Frederica's back.

She narrowed the pupils of her sharp eyes, and looked back down at Subaru with a gaze that held only intimidation. Although, Subaru understood it was only a misunderstanding, as he had the same kind of eyes, with more white area than was usual.

Coming to the correct assumption that his silence was affirmation at her question, Frederica said,

[Frederica: Is she doing well? I ask because, since my return to the Mansion, I have yet to see her face]

[Subaru: I already told Emilia-tan, but she was doing ok…I guess. Though, I couldn't talk to her as much as I normally do, since she was in a worse mood than usual]

[Frederica: Is……that so]

As though anxious, her expression at Subaru's answer was not a bright one.

Seeing that look, Subaru couldn't help but wonder about something. It was about what the role of the girl named Beatrice actually was, in the Mansion.

Up until now, Subaru had not dug deep into her position or background.

The girl, in the Mansion of Margrave Roswaal, stayed in a mysterious magical space, the Forbidden Library, and was treated by Rem and Ram as both guest and nobility.

Then again, she seems to childishly adore Puck, a spirit contracted to Emilia, a candidate for the Royal Election, as though he were an older brother. Also, the way she behaved towards Subaru seemed appropriate for her age, though her actions during their last encounter——they were all mysteries.

[Subaru: Umm, Frederica, you've been working in the Mansion for a while?]

[Frederica: Oh, are you interested? Emilia-sama, the girl in your arms……and Beatrice-sama…you seem to have a lot of interests]

[Subaru: Stop mixing Beako in so smoothly, I'm not interested in young kids. You can see that both my hands are filled with Emilia-tan and Rem, right? Frederica is…Honestly, it's only been a short time, but you're not my type]

[Frederica: Oh, I'm hated]

[Subaru: It's no good, you trying to yank my chain feels just like what one of Roswaal's maids would do. Oh, and it's only an issue of personal preference; I don't hate you or anything]

Frederica’s eyes danced, and she laughed at Subaru’s comeback, while covering her mouth with its cruel-looking fangs.

[Frederica: I’m not much concerned. You, also seem to be a worrywart]

[Subaru: It’s because I hurt you when we first met. You laughed it off, but it still hurt a bit, didn’t it?]

[Frederica: ……]

At Subaru’s words, Frederica’s eyes flickered with an expression of surprise this time. The smile wiped from her face, she stared at him. The gold in her eyes sparkling, she slid her gaze to meet his, and Subaru was met with the sensation that she was trying to look through him.

Slowly letting out a small sigh, Frederica said,

[Frederica: It is not very often that someone sees into my heart. I would appreciate it, if you refrained from doing so]

[Subaru: I just tried to put back together what I’d trampled over. Besides, I’m one to talk, what with my eyes being just as fierce looking……well, for me it’s the whole family though]

Since both his parents had naturally fierce expressions, their son had it too.

During dinner, they all wore the same expressions as they squirted out mayonnaise from their own personal tubes, and it probably looked as though

they were performing some Black Magic around the dining table.

Frowning as he saw his own memories objectively, Frederica deepened her sigh even further.

[Frederica: You are not a discomforting guy, just really strange. I think I understand why Emilia-sama behaves the way she does]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, what?]

[Frederica: It is nothing. This time, Emilia-sama would truly be upset with me. What will you do once you know how long I have worked here?]

Shaking her head, Frederica shifted the topic back.

Even though he couldn't make sense of those words, Subaru too returned to the original topic.

[Subaru: So the thing is, I wanted to talk about Beako… Beatrice. If you worked here as a maid for a long time, then I wanted to ask how long she's been living in the Mansion]

He hadn't voiced it as a question or anything, but from Subaru's estimation, Frederica was several years older——Around 23 or 24. Even if she was a veteran maid of ten years, and since Beatrice was around twelve now by all accounts, all he had to do was count back and he could come up with an estimate.

But, at Subaru's question, Frederica shook her head.

[Frederica: I am sorry, but I do not know. Beatrice-sama has shut herself up in the Library a long time, since before I started working in this Mansion]

[Subaru: Ah, well I guess it can't be helped. Your background as a maid doesn't necessarily mean it directly correlates with how long you've worked in Ros-chi's Mansion. So you came to the mansion as an expert maid then…]

[Frederica: No, that is not the case, Subaru-sama]

Frederica interrupted Subaru, who felt his conclusion had been denied by a rather plausible reason.

As Subaru furrowed his brows, she straightened her back, and complemented by her vicious countenance and a noticeable concern, she said,

[Frederica: The only place I have worked at as a Maid, is here at the Master's mansion. And when I was first taken in as a servant, I was 12 years old. That was over 10 years ago]

[Subaru: ……Wait, isn't that weird? Because, calculating back since then, that would mean Beako has been shut-up in that moldy room from when she was a toddler]

[Frederica: Don't you, already know?]

As though criticizing Subaru's stubbornness, Frederica shook her head.

With her attitude confirming a doubt he had held within his heart, Subaru

understood what he had tried to avoid thinking about too deeply.

In other words, the girl in the library—

[Subaru: Her appearance hasn't changed. …… I guess she really isn't human then]

[Frederica: Since the beginning of the Mathers Family, the librarian who took an oath to continue watching over the Forbidden Library——that is who she is, the Great Spirit Beatrice-sama]

Unable to detect a lie in her words, Subaru was left with no choice but to accept them.

The true identity of the girl he had interacted with until now, was an existence that belonged to a completely different dimension.

[Subaru: Great Spirit… that title is the same as Puck's, but she looks really different and all]

[Frederica: It relates to the absence of a contract and the oath…… no, this is more than I should say. Please forget it]

[Subaru: Impossible, totally impossible]

How many times had Subaru's ignorance caused him to be dragged around by what other people knew but wouldn't share.

Frederica did not care about Subaru's scornful glare, and tightened her lips; it seems she had no intention of touching the subject again. At her attitude and

behavior, Subaru sighed, recognizing that he would be unable to pursue talking about Beatrice.

Remembering their talk had continued on while their legs had ceased moving,

[Subaru: Frederica]

[Frederica: Forgive me, Subaru-sama. My tongue was a little too loose. I was just glad someone appeared that cares about Beatrice-sama. Please, forgive me]

[Subaru: It's okay, but my arms are at their limit]

His upper arms shaking, Subaru looked up at Frederica with a stiff expression on his face.

He was acting strong because "it's a light light body" and "anything's possible with love", but things like his arm strength, muscle stamina, and so on, ignored those lines, attacking him in force.

[Frederica: Oh, oh]

[Subaru: So, step away, please!]

Subaru swore to himself he would never do something as foolish as setting Rem down on the floor, or handing her to Frederica; then brushed past her and her offer to switch, heading to the guest room with hurried steps.

The sounds of soft footfalls running echoed from behind; it seemed Frederica was following behind him. Reflecting on the horrible way he had ended their talk, he arrived in front of Rem's room.

[Emilia: —You really, took your time]

Emilia said, her expression showing how monotonous her wait for Subaru had been.

Laying Rem down on the bed, Subaru pulled the quilts up over her chest. The beating of her heart, and the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, gave testament to the fact that she still lives. Until the day her eyes open again, he wondered just how much time she would spend here.

[Subaru: I guess that'll depend on how hard I try, huh]

Turning his feelings into a new vow, Subaru gently brushed away Rem's hair resting on her brow, and then, he turned around to face Emilia, who had been standing silently behind him.

[Subaru: Sorry for making you wait. Frederica and I ended up talking about all sorts of things, and I wound up with some serious build-up of lactic acid in my biceps]

[Emilia: It's wonderful if you were sidetracked in conversation. What were you and Frederica talking about?]

[Subaru: I started by asking some questions relating to rehabilitating the shut-in little girl. How long has she's been shut-in, when did it start, how she treated

people after it happened… they're all closely related to her recovery]

[Emilia: Hmmm, I see. Subaru, you're really informed when it comes to shut-ins. It's amazing]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, I'm sure you didn't mean it but… your words sometimes cut me to my core. Just like right now]

It was a bit disconcerting how genuinely she seemed to be praising him. Emilia, her expression purely innocent, tilted her head and looked at Subaru, who was frowning. He replied with a wry smile, and shrugged his shoulders.

[Emilia: So, you weren't able to get Beatrice to tell you anything, then?]

[Subaru: Her mouth is shut firm and she doesn't budge. By the way, I know I've asked this a lot already but …where's Puck?]

[Emilia: —No luck, there's still no response. This happens once in a while, but the timing is reeealy horrible this time. Geez, this is really distressing]

Reaching into her shirt, Emilia pulled out the green crystal stone. Fit in a pendant, the stone was faintly glowing. Within, a bewitching light swirled where the Great Spirit resided. It was the link that sealed the contract between Emilia and Puck, and Subaru, having seen his materialized form going in and out of that crystal almost daily, knew this as well. Only, as one could deduce from their conversation, there has been no hint of him within the crystal stone these past few days. He was gone ——It was hard to believe, but he wasn't responding to their calls.

[Subaru: This, happens sometimes? But, that's got to be really exasperating for you]

[Emilia: Whenever I really, really need Puck's help, he always comes. So, I don't think he's not watching… I've asked him about what he does when he's not around, but he's never told me]

Hearing Emilia's apologetic words, Subaru scratched his head, saying, [That's…]. He couldn't hide his disappointment at the fact that Puck, who was aware of everything, would choose to remain silent. With this, all the important figures he could have relied upon for help with his doubts, had all gone silent at once.

[Subaru: Puck and Beako, both quit talking to me at the same time. …This blows]

[Emilia: I know……Hey, Subaru, what should we do?]

Subaru, resting his hand on his forehead, was in deep thought when Emilia asked him for his decision.

He cast down his eyes at her call. Seeing the reliance and trust that dwelt within her gaze, he despised himself for feeling so happy at a time such as this. Realizing that she was relying on him, out of that trapped, stifling feeling, he understood what he must do.

[Subaru: Since the two who might actually know something suddenly went quiet, we really don't have a choice but to move on. …Although, even if we find that guy, whether he'll tell us anything is another matter…]

[Emilia: You mean Roswaal, right?]

[Subaru: Yeah, it's about time he spilled his guts and told us everything that's been going on, I think]

Seeing Emilia's grasp of the situation, Subaru nodded his head. Since she recognized his train of thought, she was probably thinking the same thing as well.

Emilia placed a hand over her chest, and seemed relieved that their opinions aligned.

[Emilia: I'm so glad, that Subaru agrees with me. I was wondering what I would do if you object to my proposals like Roswaal and Ram always do]

[Subaru: I might disagree depending on the details, but overall, I'm a hundred-percent behind Emilia-tan, you know? Even if I disagree with you, it'll always be because of my love for Emilia-tan, I hope you can believe me]

[Emilia: Love… —Subaru, you reeeally know how to pick the opportunity to flirt]

Subaru's irresponsible pick-up line took Emilia by surprise, and she quickly turned her face away. Subaru's cheeks were reddening slightly as well as he clenched his fists, while Emilia, still refusing to look at him, said,

[Emilia: Then, I have a proposal for you, Subaru, since you're always on my

side]

[Subaru: Alright, let's hear it, whatever you want]

Subaru placed a hand to his chest in respectful subservience. Seeing this, Emilia closed one of her eyes saying "Since you said it so nicely", pursing up her lips and looking back at him.

Then, taking a moment to let out a deep breath, Emilia stared directly into Subaru's dark pupils.

[Emilia: There are things we need to talk about with Roswaal, and we also have to know what happened with the villagers, right? That's why, I want to go to the "Sanctuary"]

[Subaru: "Sanctuary"……]

It was the name of a place he had heard countless times at the Roswaal Mansion. Subaru had unfortunately never been able to find out where it was, but the evacuees led by Ram had headed there to avoid the Witch Cult. At the very least, now that the sect of the Witch Cult led by Betelgeuse had been annihilated, the threat level at the "Sanctuary" should be no more than that of the mansion.

[Emilia: I've been told it's a place I'd need to visit sometime anyway, so I think this is the perfect time. I've decided that this time, I'll finally talk with Roswaal about everything]

[Subaru: W, wa, wai, wait a minute! You aren't thinking of leaving me behind

are you!?]

[Emilia: Eh?]

Holding his hand up in front of him at Emilia's enthusiastic words, Subaru put a damper on her decisive declaration. But even so, Subaru had to say it.

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, I know you're getting pumped, and I'm in agreement, but you can't just leave me behind. I know I'm weak and dimwitted, but I'd hate it if I couldn't try my best by your side. I know it's selfish, but please understand!]

Hearing Subaru's ardent, relentless words, Emilia's eyes widened.

But they were unmistakably his true thoughts. Subaru was going to stay with Emilia. If he wasn't with her, he couldn't protect her. He couldn't do anything for her. There was no pretense to his feelings, it was simply that his existence was necessary to help her. It had nothing to do with him wanting something in return, it was simply what he wanted to do.

Emilia's expression still showed her astonishment at the forcefulness of Subaru's words. Deciding that now would be the best time to throw her off balance, he continued.

[Subaru: It's no use if you try and stop me. I'm going with you. I've no intention of getting left behind. Whether it's the "Sanctuary" or Roswaal we're going to face, nothing will stand in the way of my burning love for——]

[Emilia: There's no way I'd leave you behind. Come with me]

[Subaru: I don’t want to get left behind, no no NO! —wait, what did you say?]

Subaru, still half-way down on the floor and about ready to grovel and plead, asked Emilia this question.

Seeing his display, Emilia placed a hand against her lips, her face reddening ever so slightly.

[Emilia: Like I said, come with me. I’d be too anxious if it was just me]

[Subaru: Eh, Emilia-tan……]

[Emilia: Subaru, I’m counting on you. I don’t think you’re weak, or dimwitted. I, need your strength]

[Subaru: ———]

The impact those words had on Subaru went beyond description. His mouth agape, Emilia’s face clouded over with uncertainty at his stillness. Lifting up her hand, as though struggling over whether to reach out and touch him or not,

[Emilia: Ah, uhm, wh, what’s the matter? Did I say something strange again?]

[Subaru: The switch to my motivation is in your hands. Whether it’s on or off, depends on just a word from you. I can’t take it]

Covering his face in his hands, Subaru spoke teasingly to Emilia. [Eh? Eh?? What do you mean?], unable to read the intention behind his words, Emilia fumbled for a reply. Seeing her so confused, he almost wanted to rub it in her face. After all Subaru had just went though at her hands, he's savoring every last bit of it.

[Frederica: —It sounds like you've come to an agreement]

[Subaru: Gyaa—!?]

Their exchange, which must have looked like two people flirting, was tragically interrupted by a knock on the door followed by Frederica's entrance.

Emilia wasn't surprised by her arrival, but Subaru, trying hard to conceal the thumping of his heart, couldn't help but glare at her. Even though Frederica must have easily seen through Subaru's feelings, not a hint of it appeared in her calm, but still vicious-looking expression.

[Frederica: I have no objections about the two of you heading to the "Sanctuary". However, preparations will take about two days]

[Subaru: By preparations, does that mean you're coming with us?]

[Frederica: Not at all. As I still have duties here, I will be unable to accompany you. I will instead give the directions to the "Sanctuary" to the ground dragon you brought back with you]

[Subaru: You mean Patrasche?]

Subaru widened his eyes at the unexpected proposition. His response received a [Why, yes] from Frederica, who continued as though it were obvious.

[Frederica: Ground dragons are very clever creatures. If you instruct them properly, they can understand which roads to take well enough that a guide is unnecessary. Since she seems especially clever, I don't think it will be an issue]

[Subaru: Patrasche, you just keep on getting more and more valuable! Really, just what triggered this turn of events?]

[Frederica: More importantly, there are several things I must tell you two]

Subaru tilted his head trying to understand his partner, but Frederica ignored his question, straightening her muscled body, she looked at both of them,

[Frederica: If you are headed for the "Sanctuary", there are several things I would like you to remember. Especially Emilia, I would like you to be careful of the issue of your birth and appearance]

[Emilia: ——Yes, I've prepared myself. After all, I've heard it's a place with some complicated issues]

At Frederica's dire warnings, Emilia tightened her jaw, the look in her eyes carried her strength of will. To show he respected her decision, Subaru moved to stand beside her.

[Subaru: Honestly, I don't know anything about that place except that it's

called the “Sanctuary”……but my supreme goal is to support Emilia-tan. So I’ll listen to whatever you have to say]

[Frederica: Actually, I sense a very refreshingly pure, ulterior motive there]

Exasperation and admiration flashed through Frederica’s eyes at the same time, then, blinking once, she pushed down her sentiment, and held up a finger.

[Frederica: In that case, let me tell you about the “Sanctuary”. But before that, there is one thing I need you to remember]

[Subaru: Need us…]

[Emilia: …To remember?]

Subaru and Emilia’s heads tilted at the same time. Seeing this, Frederica nodded with a [Yes], dropping her voice ever so slightly.

[Frederica: ——Beware of someone named Garfiel. Within the Sanctuary, you two must be very careful, of coming into contact with that man]

Chapter 05 [The Emilia-Faction]

Just as Frederica declared, it was two days later when they set out for the Sanctuary.

In between her duties at the mansion, Frederica had been teaching Patrasche in the stables about the location of the Sanctuary. Since she was responsible for most of the work at the mansion, Subaru suggested she could lighten her workload if she just told him the location of the “Sanctuary” directly, but

[Frederica: My apologies, but the location of the Sanctuary is of great importance to our master. As a mere servant, I cannot act rashly in this matter. I would have prefered to not even teach it to the ground dragon if I could avoid it]

So she politely refused to teach him.

Although it didn’t sit well with him, complaining about Roswaal’s over-cautiousness wouldn’t get him any closer to the Sanctuary. And considering how things were unravelling, Subaru had no choice but to submit to Frederica’s judgments.

And so, Subaru spent two uneventful days hanging out with the villagers, and, returning to the role of a servant, performing some of the menial tasks at the mansion.

All the while, pursing up her lips in annoyance that Puck still wouldn't come out, Emilia, who also had nothing to do, would timidly follow Subaru to the village and make an effort to reduce the distance between the villagers and herself. And also, reading all sorts of books and texts Subaru couldn't understand, she spent her time building her knowledge.

As they each spent their two days in their respective ways, there were a few changes that occurred.

The first was,

[Otto: Aaah! Why is everything dumped in a heap!? Documents that need to be prioritized, documents that can be discarded as soon as they've been read, and documents that aren't even worth reading, when they aren't sorted properly it ends up like this……!]

Scratching his head violently while grumbling, Otto sorted the documents around him at an incredible speed. Quickly looking over a document and roughly grasping its contents, he tossed it into one of the giant sorted piles on the table, then onto the next, and the next, he continued to separate and organize. Watching Otto's eyes and hands flicker here and there, turning his head from side to side so quickly one would almost expect to see flames shooting out, across the table, Subaru, resting his chin in his hands, sighed in amazement,

[Subaru: Haa, that's amazing! If it was me, even if they were printed out neatly it'll still be gibberish to me…]

[Otto: It's not as if I'm trying to understand them. I'm only separating them into documents relating to finances, relating to petitions, and various other types efficiently first. If only each document was sorted when they first came

in…… But, looking at this arrangement, it's organized in a way that only the man himself could understand, I'm afraid]

It was unheard of, that Subaru should find himself feeling a sense admiration for Otto, who was glaring at the mountain of documents looking rather appalled. Hearing him speak of the documents' owner —— Roswaal's face emerged in Subaru's mind, and he couldn't help but feel that, despite being blurted out casually, Otto's theory was probably spot on.

It's a frightening thought, to think Roswaal would be so capable that he could see some kind of logic to this giant pile of documents. But the problem was, that since no one else could understand it, without him here, there was no choice but to sort them all from scratch.

[Otto: Ok, it's in broad categories now. Next, is to arrange them in chronological order… But before that, maybe I should separate them more into processed and unprocessed first…]

[Subaru: I don't know whether I should call you meticulous or obsessive compulsive, but Otto, you're definitely a Type-A, aren't you]

[Otto: What's a *taɪp eɪ*? That doesn't sound like anything good at all]

Seeing Otto stare at him, Subaru waved his hand from side to side without bothering to explain. It's not like he actually believed that blood type had anything to do with one's personality, aside from being useful as a half-assed conversation topic.

Incidentally, Subaru is Type-B ——or rather, the entire Natsuki-family is Type-

B. Whenever this was mentioned to someone, the reply they get would always be [I knew it], and so it wasn't a very pleasant subject for them.

[Otto: Wait, now that I think about it…]

[Subaru: What's that, why did you stop? You were going at such a great pace, keep going]

[Otto: As someone who cares about efficiency, I don't really mind doing this, but isn't this situation a bit odd? Why am I, a travelling merchant, standing in the Margrave's office with sweat all over my forehead working so hard to sort through his documents? Isn't my position a bit odd here?]

[Subaru: That took you pretty long to notice, didn't it?]

Seeing Otto only just now noticing all this, Subaru lowered his head and laughed deviously. The reason Otto was performing this menial task——rearranging documents pertaining to the Margrave's affairs no less, was all entwined with Subaru's schemes…

That is, to secure useful talents for the Emilia-faction in the Roswaal-camp.

In the present situation, as Subaru sees it, Emilia's position in the Royal Selection isn't good at all. As her Knight, or at least as someone generally recognized as such, he was instrumental in repulsing the Witch Cult and slaying the White Whale, but, compared to the abysmal negativity still surrounding Emilia's situation, just how much of an effect did all this have is still a question.

Compared to each of the other camps, Emilia was behind before the race had

even begun. Further increasing the difficulty of her position was the fact that her key supporter, Roswaal's true intentions are still utterly indiscernible. Although he was publicly backing her, so far, Roswaal's performance as her patron could only be described with the word "failed".

He failed to prepare a single countermeasure against the Witch Cult even though he should have foreseen it from a mile away, and now, after having overcome that threat, they don't even have a way to contact him. If he could just come out and announce whether he is an ally or enemy already… either way, he is certainly a troubling existence.

On top of that, the people surrounding Roswaal all tended to keep their mouths shut when it comes to their master's true intentions. Revering Roswaal above all else with unquestioning devotion, Ram's behaviour was only to be expected, and Frederica, with her strong dedication to her role as a servant, would not say anything either. Even Puck and Beatrice would not break their silence on the matter to Subaru and Emilia.

In other words, there was not a single person Emilia could safely confide in.

Of course, Subaru wanted to become that person to her, and was in fact acting in a way befitting such an existence, but Subaru's reach was too short, even compared to an average person. He was sadly aware of the fact that he was not a man who could reach her every itch, and by himself alone, he could not wipe away her every discomfort, and this bothered him to no end.

So then, the one who caught Subaru's eye was the man going back and forth between Arlam village and the mansion, the one who would smack his lips after dinner and tea saying things like "Aaaa, having no ambition and getting settled down like this would surely make anyone rot" while smiling relaxedly… Otto.

[Subaru: In other words, the “if there aren’t any allies around, why not start cultivating some now” battle plan]

[Otto: I find what you suddenly said somewhat disturbing, but what does that have to do with me!?]

[Subaru: Hmm, I dunno… Maybe… Ah, Otto-san. You still haven’t sorted the documents over here]

[Otto: Oh, sorry. Let’s see, the mining locations for arcane minerals and the quantities of their reserves and this…… AREN’T THESE THE KIND OF DOCUMENTS OUTSIDERS ABSOLUTELY SHOULDN’T BE ALLOWED TO SEE!?]

[Subaru: Aah, you saw… I see, you saw them… Aaah, ok, ok. Yeah, well, I’ll to do my best to explain it to Roswaal, so don’t worry, ok?]

[Otto: It’s amazing how nothing in that sentence puts me at ease!]

While Otto was complaining and trying to hold the documents he’d just been given as far away from his eyes as possible, Subaru just grinned, acting like he was only some innocent observer. Seeing Subaru’s attitude, Otto’s face took on a look of horror, and he said, with his lips shaking,

[Otto: I don’t want to believe it, but are you really trying to make me disappear by showing me documents no outsider should see, and then not coming to my defense when there’s trouble? Just to trample over the terms of our agreement?]

[Subaru: Of course not! The payment for your cargo and the favor you asked, I intend to fulfil all of them. And on top of that, I'm going to drag you even further into this, until you're in so deep that you won't be able to run away]

[Otto: Do you really have to be so twisted!? I'm just a little traveling merchant, I don't know why you are trying to put so much weight on my shoulders, but please stop it!!]

With a face that looked completely overwhelmed, Otto tried to object. Hearing this, Subaru felt he might have gone a little too far, so nodding his head lightly and changing up his expression, he mumbled [my bad] softly,

[Subaru: I went a bit too far there. I have so many different things filling up my plate, and I'm in such a hurry to sort out all these tangled threads, that I didn't even think to ask you how you felt about it, sorry]

[Otto: Ah, no, if you become so reasonable all of a sudden, I'll feel disoriented. ……Uh, I wonder if I can ask, but… What makes you expect so much from me?]

Seeing Subaru suddenly talking to him so normally, Otto got a bit confused, but he basically accepted this, and asked him this question.

After all, from his perspective, he had only known Subaru very recently, and there wasn't really anything to justify much trust between them. Of course, even for Subaru, their relationship wasn't a very strong one.

They had some contact in the previous loops, so now he had a slightly favorable impression of him, but that was all.

But if so, then why was he drawn to Otto like this?

[Subaru: Honestly, it's not like I have any particular reason to be interested in you or anything. It's not like I value you as an individual… so it has mostly to do with you meeting the criteria]

[Otto: That's awfully frank! ——I guess I can understand… but what was the criteria?]

[Subaru: The fact that you're completely unrelated to any of the factions in the Royal Selection. And being good at weighing gains and losses, and your ability to negotiate and gather support are obviously valuable qualities. And, most importantly, you don't seem to discriminate against Emilia for being a half-elf, or see her in a different way because of it]

[Otto: ——]

Hearing these three reasons, Otto stared at him without saying a word.

Considering the situation Subaru and the others had found themselves in, these are all conditions that cannot be neglected. And up to now, as Subaru judged, this man: Otto Suwen, was the only person to have met all of them.

Otto, still without a word, was waiting for Subaru.

Unlike when they were bantering just moments earlier, his eyes were lit with a calm, calculating brightness, flickering as if trying to peer into Subaru's mind.

Subaru understood he was being evaluated. Nor was he trying to hide. He had been evaluating Otto to begin with, so of course this is only fair, but…

[Subaru: Also, and this is just my personal opinion…]

[Otto: ——Let's hear it]

[Subaru: I feel like I can get along with you. Frankly, even though there is nothing better than gaining more allies for Emilia-tan, it's an extra bonus if we can get along. Ah, and also because you don't have any feelings for Emilia-tan as a woman. Because if it ever comes to that, even if we were lifelong friends I'll have to cut you down……!]

[Otto: You'd kill your love rivals!?]

[Subaru: If I had any rivals, I'll have zero confidence in me being able to win! Don't you underestimate my self-loathing! In my life up to this point, the number of people who actually like me can be counted with a single hand, you know!]

Specifically, his parents, Rem, Wilhelm, Emilia, and with some reservations, Julius and Reinhart… and that's about it. Actually, come to think of it, the count went past one hand just now.

Receiving this kind of appraisal after coming into this Parallel World… perhaps he was actually becoming more respectable after all. Even though he couldn't see any of it in the mirror.

Anyway,

[Otto: Geez, you really are a refreshingly straightforward person. But, without any kind of reservations when sitting across a merchant on the negotiation table, you might as well be a sitting duck, you know?]

[Subaru: If this were a negotiating table even I might try to hustle you a little, but it's not a merchant and a duck sitting here, it's just me and you, right? But, if that's how you see things, I'll go change my equipment and my attitude…]

[Otto: After having just praised me for my aptitude as a merchant, you go and say something like that? That idiom about how your tongue hasn't even dried before changing your words applies perfectly here! ……What is it with you?]

With a bothered-looking expression, Otto sighed, and all signs of the suspenseful and guarded attitude of moments ago disappeared from his face. He took a quick glance at Subaru, who was trying to look indifferent, and said,

[Otto: I don't know why I'm saying this here but, Natsuki-san, I have a goal too… It's not something so grand that I could brag about to other people, but it is a dream nonetheless]

[Subaru: I think a man's dreams can either be so ridiculous that they need to be ludicrously exaggerated, or so ridiculous that they have to be kept inside and never told to anyone, those are the only two kinds there are, I feel, but are you going to tell me yours?]

[Otto: The fact that I agree with you is really unpleasant… Anyway, you see, I was born the second son of a fairly successful merchant family. Ever since I was little, I was brought up in an affluent environment, though when it came time for me to become independent, I didn't receive much support]

Subaru didn't know how many similarities there would be between the sibling situations of this world and the world where he came from, but at least the same basics of passing on titles and inheritance seemed to apply here as well —— specifically, that it would be passed on to the eldest son.

In that case, as Subaru had expected of a fantasy-world set in the middle ages, Otto, having been born as the second son, only had a choice of either becoming his elder brother's assistant, or aiming for independence by himself.

[Otto: While helping my brother manage his business, I learned the fundamentals of the trade, and managed to save up enough money to set out on my own. With that money, I bought Furufu, my ground dragon, as well as a wagon to go with him, and… Well, I also had the Divine Protection I was born with, so all in all, it went pretty smoothly, I think.

[Subaru: By Divine Protection, you mean the Divine Protection of "Anima Whispering", right? Being able to talk to different kinds of animals, depending on how you use it, I guess you could make quite a crazy profit from it]

[Otto: But it's not as useful as you make it sound… There are quite a few inconvenient problems that comes with it that Natsuki-san hadn't thought of. In any case, it was followed by several years of me plugging away and barely scraping by, but in that time, something of a dream had sprouted inside my mind…]

Continuing with his story after delving into how he became independent, Otto once again brought up the word "dream". Hearing that, for no particular reason, Subaru sat up properly, as if to listen attentively. Receiving this attention, Otto smiled warmly, and started off with [It's a pretty common dream, you know],

[Otto: Any merchant who's been a traveling merchant will have this dream. ——It's to own a place of my own, just like having my own castle, to have my own shop… to settle down there and do business there. If I could have this in some big city, it'll probably be the greatest happiness a merchant can hope for]

[Subaru: That's your dream, Otto?]

[Otto: It's a pretty boring thing to hope for… But after having traveled and traveled, in the end, all I want is just to have the same thing I had when I was growing up. But, well, I guess you could say, that environment had been the symbol of happiness for me]

Scratching his cheeks in embarrassment, Otto spoke faster and faster to try to cover it up. Subaru took in Otto's answer, and, wondering whether he would get a favourable reply, he leaned back, and dropped all his weight into his chair.

But, aloof to Subaru's concern, with a [That's why], Otto continued on,

[Otto: A chance to make a big shot like the Margrave indebted to me… as the second son of a trader family, as a traveling merchant, and as a great merchant of future to come, I can't possibly let such an opportunity pass me by. Especially considering I'd be selling a favor to someone who might become the future King of this country, it's a business opportunity so huge that even if I redo my entire life I won't be able to find the likes of it again, isn't it?]

[Subaru: Ok, so you'll join us then. Thanks, I'm glad. I knew you'd make the right choice, Otto. Now keep sorting the documents]

[Otto: What!? That was a pretty good speech just now wasn't it?? Isn't that reaction too lacking!?]

[Subaru: I feel like letting it make an impression on me would mean that I lose somehow… Well anyway, the moment you touched these documents that no outsiders are allowed to see, there was already no way out for you. Kekkekeke!]

[Otto: No matter how I look at you, you're still a terrible person!]

At the end of this long conversation, it seemed as though nothing had actually changed, and Otto didn't receive much compensation for his newfound determination.

But even while teasing Otto like this, deep down, Subaru was thankful for it…… Though these words will never come out of his mouth.

[Otto: But I have to say this first, unlike Natsuki-san who supports Emilia-sama unconditionally, I'm only cooperating because of the present circumstances. If the Margrave and Emilia-sama ever fight amongst themselves inside the faction, I'll need to weigh the gains and losses before choosing a side. So please don't mistake me for a full-fledged ally]

[Subaru: If you're weighing Emilia-tan and Roswaal on a balance scale, you're completely in my hands. I will slowly and surely feed you all of Emilia-tan's good qualities, so don't you worry. —You heard everything loud and clear just now, right?]

Brushing aside Otto's long-winded excuse, at the end his last sentence, Subaru turned his face and his words toward a completely different direction. Seeing

Subaru do this, Otto, stunned with a dumbfounded expression on his face, turned his gaze to where Subaru was looking. And there,

[Yep… I mean, Yes. I heard it properly, Subaru-sama.]

With a lovely smile, the girl in maid's uniform swung her chestnut-colored hair, standing there at the door.

Of the changes that took place in the Mansion during these two days, this was the second.

–

With only Frederica, (Subaru was also helping, but his ability as a servant was half-assed at best, and his health still hasn't fully recovered yet) managing everything at the mansion alone was physically impossible. So Frederica, understanding this, went down to the village personally to recruit some help, and that's where this girl jumped in with open arms — Petra Leyté.

Being a resident of Arlam village, and being among those who evacuated to the Capital, she had safely returned with them. But since most of the other villagers had not yet returned, it must have been an unsettling time for her.

But still, when Frederica came to recruit a new maid for the mansion, she instantly jumped in. And as there were no other candidates who were interested, she was picked up, and was now working in the Mansion in temporary employment.

[Subaru: You are still so small, but you're leaving your parents and coming here

to work as a maid, you're amazing, Petra]

[Petra: I'm already twelve, so I'm an adult who can work now… Actually, I am just an adult. Subaru-sama could you treat me like one please?]

[Subaru: I will consider it, if you say it politely, after you get the "temporary" part removed from your "temporary employment" and after you get an official certificate from Frederica. Until then, I'll always treat you like a cute little girl~]

When he patted her head clumsily as she squirmed around, the girl, with her neatly arranged hair all messed up, let out a quiet [Eeek—], and clung onto him tightly. It was a completely different reaction than what he expected, but it was certainly a lot better than being abused and spat on.

In any case, she was at an age where she wants to be older than she is and stand up on tiptoes. Petra, with her surprisingly strong character, and her own way of growing up, her aptitude for being a maid was really quite high. Although she didn't meet all the points, in cleaning up the Mansion and preparing food with Frederica's support, she has already surpassed Subaru in ability.

….Well, Subaru is really useless.

–

So, from outside the door of the Master's office, she had been pricking up her ears to listen in on the conversation inside. She was, of course, acting on Subaru's instructions, and needless to say, it was all part of his scheme to lure out Otto's commitment and cut off his escape.

Noticing all this, Otto's face turning red, he glared at Subaru,

[Otto: It was a s-set-up—— !?]

[Subaru: It's nothing to be concerned about. With a third person involved, your statements earlier are now legitimate official record. It was an emotional, heartrending manipulation in order to secure witness testimony for the jury later…… so think of it like that]

[Otto: What is so emotionally heartrending about a man talking about "manipulation"!?]

Hugging his own head, Otto, finally understanding there was now nowhere to run, shouted at them in a half-crying state, but it was too late. Giving Otto a grin, Subaru held up his thumb to Petra, who was standing at the door.

[Subaru: Good job, Petra! But won't you get scolded by Frederica, using time on something like this?]

[Petra: Right now, I'm spending my time sweeping the corridor. Using even more time to sweep the corridor in front of the the Margrave's office, I wouldn't be scolded.]

[Subaru: You're very shrewd~. Even a small girl is a woman, after all……]

Listening only to the second half of Subaru deeply emotive words, Petra cheerfully loosened her cheeks. Seeing her predictably unchanging reactions and attitudes, it was true that there was something in there that warmed Subaru's heart.

Petra, like Otto, is another ally who is not under the influence of Roswaal.

Compared to Otto, there was not much she could do for Emilia, and her significance and influence is probably even less than Subaru's. But, she is not afraid of Emilia. On the road to the Capital City during their evacuation, she wholeheartedly remained at Emilia side. Subaru would not forget that, and, probably, Emilia would never forget either.

Her being there, perhaps there will be a time when Emilia will be saved by that existence.

[Subaru: It never hurts to have more allies. What you can do isn't a problem… What is important is what you are willing to do, and what you will strive to able to do for that person. After all, if I am counting the number of things I can do, it'll look really bad for me…]

His merits and his deficiencies, Subaru could probably count with his fingers and figure out that he had more deficiencies. But even so, he wants to be her ally, and so he has to use the few things he does have to their full potential, and keep on going, one way or another.

With a to-hell-with-it attitude, with nothing to stop him, embracing this over-optimistic explanation,

[Subaru: We are definitely small, but let's do our best from now on. This is what we are, the very first members of the Emilia-faction!]

Making a fist and punching it out into the air, Subaru made his declaration.

Seeing that, Petra and Otto, having been left out, looked at each other's faces, and

[Otto: I never said that I'm a part of that faction, right? Please don't misunderstand, okay?]

[Petra: I want to be an ally of big sister too, but I don't want to lose to her in what's important…]

Otto looked appalled, holding his head. Petra, joining her hands behind her back, looked down and muttered hesitatingly.

But still, in the end, they succeeded in matching up their fist bumps, so that there could be no doubt remaining in any bystander's mind that they totally knew what they were doing.

——The two days before setting out toward the Sanctuary, even though it was only a tiny step forward, there was something real in all of that, and, thinking this, the wait had already come to an end.

Chapter 06 [Along The Road To The Sanctuary]

[Frederica: I will not be able to accompany you, so please take care during your journey. Also, if you would, please tell the Master that Frederica is watching over the estate]

It was the morning of departure, and the dragon carriage was parked outside the front of the mansion. Coming to see them off, with these words, Frederica bent the small of her back in a bow.

Her form in her bow was so beautifully refined, that anyone receiving it would be intimidated into naturally straightening their backs.

In any case, receiving this, Subaru and Emilia met each other's gaze.

[Emilia: I am the one who should be sorry, I know how hectic things are right now… Roswaal is absent, and I really should be the one acting in his stead, yet……]

[Subaru: Anyway, Emilia and I are clueless when it comes to caring for the mansion. Even if I can handle routine tasks, everyone could see how much of an amateur I am when numbers are involved. I tried throwing Otto into all that to sort it out, but it's like sprinkling water on hot coals]

Looking at the results over the past two days, Subaru could only smile wryly at

how futile their efforts had been.

He and Otto wandered aimlessly through the cluttered office, and the only thing they learned was that “it’s impossible without any explanation from the one responsible” …That one statement pretty much summed up the extent of their progress.

Frederica seemed to have a rough idea, but it would take time to cover the discrepancy after her months of absence. Actually, thinking of how much work was involved in just maintaining the mansion, it wouldn’t have been right to increase her workload even further.

Emilia had attentively taken care of some of the simple tasks, but aside from that, she had no choice but to plug her ears to the rest of it, even though she knew they would start piling up.

[Subaru: It’s like that feeling when you put off doing your summer holiday’s homework, and then the next thing you know, it’s the first day of the new semester. But I was never the kind of guy who doesn’t hand in his homework, though]

[Emilia: I don’t really understand, but isn’t that a good thing? Right now, I feel the complete opposite, and my chest reeealy hurts. It’s not that I feel guilty, but I know it’s not good to leave everything neglected like this]

[Subaru: It’s not actually our fault, that’s how I would rationalize it, but it’s hard for Emilia-tan, isn’t it? Well, I totally understand how unpleasant it feels to just watch things go from bad to worse…]

It was vexing, to have to neglect things that really shouldn't be put off. But while he could sympathize with Emilia's sense of guilt, it was also true that there was not much he could do to help.

In the end, he was insufficient, so the only thing to do is to call someone more competent:

[Otto: The ground dragons are all ready to go. Even though it's only been a few days since they exerted themselves, Natsuki-san's Patrasche looks like she's chafing at the bit to get going]

[Subaru: She's a good hard-working girl, isn't she? Her previous owner must have had an impressive character, unlike her current one… You think she can guide us there? It'd be horrible to get lost on the way and end up stranded]

The one who broke into their conversation was the man sitting in the driver's platform of the dragon carriage, conversing with the two ground dragons, Patrasche and Furufu —— Otto.

Since the Divine Protection of "Anima Whispering" only applied to Otto, to a bystander, he just looked like he had a screw loose in his head while he was talking to the ground dragons, but Subaru didn't remark on it.

Not noticing that Subaru was sending him a heart-warming look, Otto only responded to his question with a straightforward [uh-huh], nodding.

[Otto: Frederica's directions were good, and there doesn't seem to be any problems. I'm sure we can make the trip in under half a day]

[Subaru: I see, I see……But, were you really planning on coming too?]

[Otto: Of course I am coming!!]

After Otto's gave his seal of approval on Patrasche's directions, Subaru nodded and moved on to his next question, to which Otto stomped noisily on the wooden platform, bulging his eyes.

[Otto: After all, this will be my first meeting with the Margrave. Sure, I was the one who asked you to introduce me, but imagining the kind of introduction you'd give if I wasn't there……It's too frightening, I can't just leave it to you!]

[Subaru: Oy oy, I'll get all flustered if you keep trusting me so much]

[Otto: Yeah, though we've only known each other for a short while, I already trust you 120% ——I can be certain that Natsuki-san will alway do exactly what I don't want you to do!]

Subaru twisted his lips at these words, and Emilia, who had been listening silently up to now, let out a sudden burst of laughter.

The two men turned to the source of the laughter at the same time, and Emilia timidly raised up her hand,

[Emilia: Really, you two are such good friends. Whenever I see you together, you're always bickering so affectionately, it makes me kinda jealous]

[Subaru: If you want, I'll be affectionate toward Emilia-tan too, only I'll be

flirting instead of bickering. I'll move Emilia-tan's bickering time to Otto's timeslot, and replace it with the affectionate time from Otto's timeslot]

[Otto: If you do that, there won't be anything between us except insults and fist fights!?]

Subaru was pretty confident in his skill with words and insults, but if it comes to fighting Otto in a melee, he's not entirely sure he could come out on top. Otto looks pretty genteel, but Subaru knew personally how strong he was.

In a previous loop, after a harsh exchange, Otto had thrown him off a carriage. Knowing that his opponent wasn't just a pushover, Subaru figured his chances were pretty slim if they ever ended up head-to-head.

[Subaru: Thinking about it like that, my combat abilities are crazy low. I knew that already, but it's still depressing]

Like previously mentioned, Subaru would lose to Otto, and it goes without saying that he couldn't beat Emilia, who knows magic. He had already been demolished by Frederica, and there was no need to mention the sleeping Rem or the shut-in Beatrice. In that case, the only one Subaru had a chance against in the mansion was——

[Subaru: Come to think of it, the only one I've got a chance of beating is Petra, and I don't see her around. What gives?]

[Emilia: I'm scared to ask… but how did your train of thought shift to who you can beat? Anyway Petra has been in the mansion……oh, here she comes]

A bit astounded by Subaru's futile efforts to gain victory by process of elimination, Emilia looked toward the mansion, her purple eyes faintly flickering. Being affected, and looking toward the same direction, he saw the form of a girl swinging her sleeves in her brand-new maid's uniform as she ran up to where they stood.

[Petra: Wait, wait a minute. Suba-, Subaru-sama……!]

[Subaru: You don't need to rush, I wouldn't do something so heartless as leaving all of a sudden, only Otto would do something like that. Right, Otto?]

[Otto: Don't you remember what you just said three seconds ago!?]

Smiling at the out-of-breath girl, who was resting her hands on her knees, Subaru pulled Otto into the conversation with some light-hearted teasing as he waited for the girl to catch her breath. Then, wiping her brow softly, Petra looked up.

Her flushed cheeks and her big, round eyes looked adorable. She let out a long breath, releasing her fatigue, and shifted her angelic face into a smile.

[Petra: I wanted to give you this before you leave. Please take it with you]

With that, she held out her hand, revealing a simple handkerchief that seemed nothing out of the ordinary.

The edges of the white cloth were laced with a golden-color, and the tips of his fingers told him it was made with meticulous workmanship. Receiving it, he turned it over to look at the other side.

[Subaru: It’s……embroidered. Oh, it’s really good]

Sewn into the surface of the white cloth, was an embroidery that was most likely hand-stitched by Petra herself. It was done with grey, pink and black colored threads, and the design was something Subaru was very well acquainted with. Just then, Emilia, who had been peeking over his shoulder, let out a small laugh [Aha].

[Emilia: It’s the same Puck you drew, Subaru. Oh wow, it’s really well done]

[Subaru: My disfigured Puck, yeah this is really well done. There mustn’t have been much time to study it either]

[Petra: I got the stamps after doing the Radeeo Calisthenics every morning]

Forgetting to speak politely, Petra pulled something out from around her neck. It was the stamp card Subaru had made and given out to the village children. ——Every morning when they participated in the radio calisthenics, he had stamped their cards with an image he’d engraved onto a sweet potato, in place of a real stamp.

She held in her hand the most recent stamp, the disfigured Puck’s “Gloomy Monday”. She must have worked hard, pricking her fingers as she sewed in the design.

[Subaru: It really is well done. As a Sewing Master, I can’t afford to lose here]

[Petra: Will you take it……Ah, no. Would you please take it?]

[Subaru: It's actually, "Would you please accept this". ——Of course, I'll gladly accept it. It seems a shame to use it for wiping blood, sweat or tears, so I'll just keep it close as a good luck charm]

Carefully folding the handkerchief, Subaru tenderly, and with great care, put it into his chest pocket before looking back towards Petra. Then, as gently as he could——he looked to the vicious, narrowed eyes and the sharpened fangs filling up the diabolical smile that was currently pointed at Petra. Hearing his words, Petra placed both her hands on her blushing face and looked away.

[Petra: I shall await your safe return. Oh, and big sister and the noisy guy too]

[Emila: It kinda seems like I'm just an extra…]

[Otto: Wait, wasn't my assessment a little too harsh!?]

Emilia and Otto responded to Petra's words in turn, a wry smile making its way onto their faces. Subaru couldn't help but find himself smiling, as Petra seemed to think nothing of the dense pressure emanating from Frederica behind her.

He had no doubt that the moment they leave, Petra will be set upon Frederica's harsh education. Petra, live strong!

[Subaru: Well then, while it's hard to leave you all, we should be on our way]

[Emilia: If we spend too much time talking here, it'd have been meaningless to

try to leave so early]

Subaru interjected, putting an end to the vibrant conversation, before hopping up into the cargo space of the dragon carriage. After that, he held out his hand,

[Subaru: If you would, Emilia-tan. Into my arms]

[Emilia: I'm sure it would be pleasant to see the scenery from the driver's platform once in awhile?]

[Subaru: Ahh, heartless! E · M · K (Emilia-tan Major Koakuma*)! ——Oh, wah!]
*little-devil

Being treated so cruelly, Subaru was almost about to withdraw his hand, when it was pulled so forcefully that he nearly fell out of the carriage as Emilia passed casually beside him.

Her silver hair brushed against his nose as she went by, until she landed inside the dragon carriage with a tiny sound. Softly sitting down across from Subaru, she tilted her head looking at him,

[Emilia: Something wrong?]

[Subaru: Nope—, nothing—?]

With these words, Subaru loudly stomped his way over to where she was, and plunked himself down beside her. Considering the inside of the carriage was very spacious, Emilia smiled at Subaru's cramped use of it.

Otto, watching their exchange, grumbled [I can't stand being associated with you] as he sat down in the driver's seat, gripping the reins and looking up at the road ahead.

[Otto: Alright then, we're off. Take care not to bite your tongues please]

[Subaru: Right back at you, don't shake the carriage too much. And if you're going to suddenly apply the brakes ——please use the signal we talked about before. Without that, it'll be hard for me to time when to push Emilia-tan down]

[Emilia: You're thinking of something like that?]

[Otto: I! I never heard that devilish plot in my life! Wait, when did I get turned into an accomplice!?]

Emilia turned a gaze of near-disdain upon both Subaru and Otto, and didn't seem to acknowledge Otto's outcry at the false accusation. Thinking Otto's wailing at the injustice of it all suited himself well, as though that had nothing to do with him, Subaru lifted up his hand,

[Subaru: Alright. Destination: "Sanctuary". Let's be off——!]

[Otto: Who are you to say that!?]

Seeing Otto sulking in the driver's seat, Subaru replied [You aren't good at getting hyped, are you] complainingly, before sticking his head out the window to look at the two who were here see to them off,

[Subaru: Okay now, we're leaving the place in your care. Also……I'm counting on you… to take good care of Rem]

[Frederica: Please, leave it to me. In return, I leave Emilia-sama and the Master in your hands]

[Petra: Take care, and come back safe]

Subaru's voice held none of its usual playfulness, and as they prepared to depart, Frederica and Petra bowed in farewell.

After that stupidly formal exchange, this time, Subaru decisively ——well, unfortunately, not without some hesitation, severed his thoughts from the mansion.

[Subaru: Oy, we haven't left yet Otto? You're slo—w]

[Otto: I can't understand this treatment!!]

This exchange blowing away the rest of the tension, they set off for the Sanctuary.

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[Frederica: It seems I'm going to have to teach you to speak more politely, and bow properly again]

[Petra: I'm so sorry. It's just……I wanted to be cosseted, if only a little]

Petra quickly lowered her head, her gesture nearly perfectly imitating Frederica's teaching. She was a fast learner, and could take things in quickly, and was certainly a student worth teaching.

The exchange from a moment ago was understandable given her age, so there was no reason to scold her over such a minor thing.

[Frederica: I know that you have been close with Subaru-sama and Emilia-sama these past few days. Still, it is not good to forget that your relationship is that of servant and employer]

[Petra: ——Yes 'mam. I am deeply sorry]

The girl was conscious of the fact that her behavior had been selfish.

She could have behaved exactly as she had been taught, and seen Subaru and the rest off properly, but she had instead intentionally separated herself from her duties as a servant, and chose to see Subaru and the others off as just a simple girl… there must have been a reason for it, and perhaps the reason was small, but it was one she was unable to part with.

[Frederica: There is no propriety in discussing this further. Instead, as penance for what you did, you will be hand-copying extra texts this afternoon]

[Petra: Uuhh……Will the number of topics increase?]

[Frederica: You should have been prepared for at least that much. Then again, if you had already calculated this would be your punishment to make up for your actions, then I am quite looking forward to your future as my student]

Saying that, Frederica clapped her hands with a [Now then], continuing,

[Frederica: Even if Emilia-sama and the rest are out for now, Beatrice-sama is still in the mansion. We can't afford to become lax with meals and cleaning. If we don't finish quickly, there won't be enough time for studies. So Petra, hurry up and finish your tasks]

[Petra: Yes, 'mam. I'll go finish them in no time!]

Watching the young girl run off, her clothes flapping, Frederica's mouth softened ever so slightly, revealing her fangs. With a practiced motion, she covered the smile with her hand, and looked towards the direction where the no longer visible dragon carriage had gone ——towards Emilia and the rest who had departed from the mansion.

[Frederica: It is as you said it would be, Master. Whether they can overcome the "Sanctuary" or not, is up to Emilia-sama and Subaru-sama now]

Closing her eyes, she let the gentle wind wash over her.

[Frederica: Will Emilia-sama be able to overcome it? Bound with the Witch's

blood, that inescapable impasse that is the garden of paradise——]

[Subaru: So, Puck hasn't shown his face yet, after all?]

[Emilia: No, he hasn't. I do call out to him, and I still feel his existence inside the crystal but…… this is the first time he has gone missing for this long, so I'm kind of worried.]

In the smoothly galloping dragon carriage, sitting together, only Subaru and Emilia's voices resounded in the car.

Under the Divine Protection of "Wind Evasion", the sound of the wind and all the noises outside were almost completely cut off from the dragon carriage. Even while running with such great speed, the near absence of turbulence or sound all made it feel like being in something of a dream.

Perhaps, this was the same luxurious feeling that might be felt while riding in the premium seats of the Shinkansen Bullet Trains, but Subaru never had a chance to experience those seats, and not even the normal seats, for that matter.

Anyway, in the quiet interior of the carriage, the words exchanged between them can be heard crisp and clear. And here, the topic of their conversation drifted to the change that had been bothering them for the past few days ——namely, the absence of the one that was usually by Emilia's side, that father-figure cat who was always thwarting Subaru's advances on Emilia… Puck.

[Subaru: Now that I think about it, he had not shown up since before we returned to the Mansion… The last time we saw him was…]

[Emilia: For me was it in the Capital City, when we were in Crusch-sama's Mansion. I thought everything was very normal, but I couldn't meet him again after that morning. Even when I call him, he doesn't show up…… I was worried if I had made him angry or something]

Looking down, Emilia played with the tips of her hair, trying not to show her face to Subaru. These few days, her silver hair had been fixed in a braid.

Seeing Subaru stare at her, as if understanding the intention behind his gaze, she nodded [Yes],

[Emilia: The final contract I made with Puck the last time I saw him was "Keeping my hair in a braid". After that, I had not been told what to do, so I kept it as it is.]

[Subaru: Your hairstyle is your contract with Puck? Really? That's really light…… isn't it? Although, it's said that hair is the life of a woman, so that's as if Puck's contract is holding a life…]

[Emilia: I think that is a reeally light price to pay. I didn't know this until I got out of the forest, but for getting into contract with a spirit like Puck, conditions like this one are way too light. Roswaal was also very surprised. In reality, you apparently need to have humongous amounts of Mana or complicated terms]

Seeing Emilia loosening the corners of her lips as she said this, Subaru nodded as if thinking of something. But then, he quickly lifted up his jaw to shake Emilia off of her weakened smile,

[Subaru: Well, for restricting even a little bit of Emilia-tan's time, for me, I would say that is a really heavy price]

[Emilia: Lines like that, if you keep saying it so lightly it would become superficial. If it was something important then it would be better to keep them for important timings, I think]

Emilia voiced her objections at how Subaru was finding more and more ways to flirt. On the other end, Subaru slightly raised both his hands and shook his head,

[Subaru: The secret lines reserved to tell Emilia-tan in important scenes are kept separately. This one was for daily life, one of the many lighter things to say to Emilia-tan]

[Emilia: Really, Subaru, you have a silver tongue. ……Oh no, maybe my face is red so don't look!]

Seeing Emilia suddenly hold up her palms to cover her face, Subaru laughed, confirming he got what he wanted. And, trying to bring the conversation back on topic, he continued with [Well…]

[Subaru: Since Puck is absent, there are some serious concerns in the combat aspect of this trip. We can't rely on Otto for fighting, and I'm obviously no good at all. And, Emilia-tan is also not as tough without Puck, right?]

[Emilia: Oh, you say things like that, huh. But I'll have you know, I can still use magic when Puck's not here. It's not just Puck, I have contracts with micro-spirits too. I have no problem communicating with them, so I can fight. I will

protect you no matter what happens.]

[Subaru: Oh no, so manly… That'll mean I'm way too pathetic, aren't I… Those words, I myself will eventually say them to Emilia-tan one day, so please wait]

[Emilia: I'll be waiting without any expectations]

As if proving Emilia's words, coming nearer, and gathering closer onto Emilia's fingertips, the micro spirits appeared drifting, shining. While they looked like Julius' demi-spirits, their existences seemed weaker in comparison —— and though their power was a world away from Puck's, at least, they certainly didn't appear to be a collection of defenseless beings.

The only girl in the group, and the one he has a crush on, no less… having to rely on her for protection would really be embarrassing…

[Subaru: That said, my reliance on other people hasn't changed much since the battle with the White Whale. I was completely dependent on Rem then, and even before that……wait, was there never a time when I worked everything out on my own!?]

Of course, that was the story from his perspective, and it might have been too much of an undervaluation.

But in any case, since there was no one with enough information to find fault with this conclusion, Subaru's horrified reaction upon realizing all this was just passed off.

[Subaru: Well, Sanctuary, huh. Actually, what kind of a place could it be…]

After a bit of self-reflection, he gazed out at the scenery outside through a little window, muttering this under his breath.

Right now, to Subaru, the Sanctuary was a place of absolute unknown. The sound of the name itself did not give off a very dangerous impression, but Frederica's warnings as she spoke of the Sanctuary weighed heavily his mind. Out of those words,

[Subaru: "Beware of Garfiel", huh]

[Emilia: You hadn't met him yet either, right, Subaru? I have only heard the name too, and Frederica didn't tell me in detail either]

As if following Subaru's mutterings, Emilia's neat eyebrows narrowed anxiously as well. The scene that emerged in her mind, was probably the same as the one in Subaru's.

The scene of Frederica's warning, to be wary of the man named Garfiel but refusing to say any more.

Even when Subaru voiced his dissatisfaction at the tiny amount of information he had been given, she only stubbornly rejected, saying [It is because of my Oath], and would not say another word. Emilia and Subaru, not knowing what to do, did not push her further.

[Subaru: I really should've gotten more out of her… Knowing full well he's a dangerous character, she's sending us there with only a name, it's just too much]

[Emilia: It can't be helped, it's an Oath. Agreements are Holy and Inviolable, never to be breached. Contracts and Oaths and Pacts, though they vary in gravity, must all be kept equally]

Swinging her raised finger, Emilia recited this to Subaru as if instructing him.

Contracts and Oaths and Pacts, like a word-game they flew into his ears, and the question suddenly coming into his mind, he let it slip from his lips,

[Subaru: So, between Emilia-tan and Puck is a Contract. Between Frederica and Roswaal is an Oath out of moral obligation. And then, the agreement exchanged between the Dragon and the Kingdom, is a Pact…… am I right? Or did I get something wrong?]

[Emilia: It isn't separated out so distinctly, but as I understand it, Contracts are between individuals, Oaths are made when one party swears to another, and Pacts are agreements that transcend individuals, and transcend even Time… That's how I was taught, at least]

[Subaru: I see. It does fit that understanding of it…]

Nodding to Emilia's explanation, Subaru proceeded to violently scratch his head, and continued with [But still],

[Subaru: It's adorned with such a lofty words, though… Agreements are Holy and Inviolable, right?]

[Emilia: Agreements…… Promises are important things. Of course, Oaths, and even Contracts have no force to protect them. It isn't there, but still, we keep promises. We work hard to keep them, right? Even if no one is watching, or no one realizes it, Promises are kept. Whether it's the other person or myself, we would do our best to keep it]

Holding her hands to her chest, Emilia locked her gaze on Subaru, who had asked the question so lightly. The tone of her voice was gentle, and there was no sense of blaming him… but his heart hurt all the more because of it.

[Emilia: Because we believe this, we give our word, and work hard to fulfill them. Because promises are kept to protect the trust between one another, right?]

[Subaru: About that… I am really sorry—— !]

In the interior of the carriage, without the slightest hint of turbulence, Subaru fell onto the floor and dropped his head straight in front of him.

Seeing him rubbing his forehead on the floor in a full DOGEZA*, for a moment, Emilia flapped her eyelids in astonishment, then a few seconds later, reflecting on what she just said combined with Subaru's current movements, she seemed to understand.

(*Dogeza is falling prostrate and pressing one's forehead and hands on the ground, for kneeling to one's lord or when praying to a God. Tappei wrote DOGEZA in English in the Japanese text :3)

[Emilia: Oh, I wasn't blaming you or anything. Well it is true that you didn't keep your promise, and then didn't even apologize, and instead turned on me, so it's true that I had gone like "what's this!"…]

[Subaru: Ow ow ow my ears hurt!]

[Emilia: But then, after thinking about it, I realized I was being unfair and was only seeing my side of things. I should have gone to reconcile with Subaru right after but I was so obstinate, that I didn't, so it was also my fault. Really, sorry]

[Subaru: Ow ow ow my chest hurts!]

[Emilia: Agreements and things like that, maybe they are deeper and heavier for me… because I am a Spirit-Arts user, contracts are more vital to me than to normal people. Spirit-Arts users must honor our contracts with spirits above all else, and that's why I'm over-sensitive when it comes to this…… Yeah, so promises are a reeeaally big deal for me. Now that I think about it, Subaru, reflect on what you did]

[Subaru: Ow ow ow my heart hurts!]

While she was blurting all this out, as if remembering everything Subaru put her through, Emilia started to pout. Sensing this, Subaru pressed his head down even harder.

It was clear now, why she was so infuriated with him in the Royal Palace.

It was not just anger due to a broken promise. For her, the promise in itself meant something far more, and far heavier. When Subaru had broken it so lightly, even a soft-hearted person such as herself could not stay calm.

Because, without realizing, Subaru had trampled on something very important in Emilia's heart.

[Emilia: Did you, reflect on your actions now?]

[Subaru: I repent. Deeper than the oceans, higher than the mountains, wider than the skies, and more expansive than the cosmos.]

[Emilia: Alright, I forgive you]

Softly poking Subaru in the forehead as he looked up, Emilia then touched her finger to her lips, smiling lightly. Relieved that there was no hint of anger from her, and also because her next movement was so adorable, Subaru found himself unable to connect his words.

Not paying any mind to the way Subaru was moving his mouth like a breathing fish, Emilia turned to look to the road ahead, and,

[Emilia: The Sanctuary, and Garfiel. And Roswaal, and everyone from the village…… there are so many people to talk to, right now my heart is already pounding]

[Subaru: Don't worry, I would never let Emilia-tan be put in any danger. Please trust your second shield, myself]

[Emilia: You're the second? Then, who's the first?]

[Subaru: Right now, he's driving the dragon carriage and flirting with my

Patrasche]

Looking at Subaru, who had just named Otto as a meat shield without his consent, this time, Emilia couldn't hold it in and burst out laughing. Watching her breaking out in laughter, Subaru was content, and in his mind, he wondered how many obstacles will be waiting for them in their road ahead.

Ever since he came to this world, he had been presented with one problem after another without a moment's rest.

Even along the road to the Sanctuary, worries and expectations of what lies in store in that unknown land were brewing within his heart. Anyhow, Frederica herself had instigated it, and Roswaal and the fact that the other villagers had not returned only added to his doubts, and there was Subaru's own inability to get Puck to come out, and… what he left in the mansion… worried him to no end.

[Emilia: Were you, thinking about Rem-san?]

[Subaru: ……You can tell?]

Subaru had suddenly fell silent. Gazing at the side of his face, Emilia tilted her head.

Her silver hair slid off of her shoulder as she did so, and lifting the tip her braid with her fingers and swinging it side to side, she said, [I can], and,

[Emilia: Just like the way you always look at me, I'd think about Subaru the same way, too]

[Subaru: So that means, Emilia-tan, you are thinking about me all the time?]

[Emilia: Oh, actually take it as half of half of half of that]

[Subaru: That means 3 hours…..!]

[Emilia: Half of half of half of……]

[Subaru: I'll get hurt if I hear the exact number, so no more!]

Calling out to stop Emilia, who had been trying to calculate the exact realistic number, Subaru dropped a small sigh and scratched his cheek, and,

[Subaru: I've entrusted her to Frederica and Petra, so there is no need to worry. There shouldn't be…… but still, this anxiety that shouldn't be welling up in me, I can't explain it in words]

[Emilia: You worry because you are worried, it can't be helped. It just means that's how important she is to you. To be thought about like that, I'm actually a little bit jealous]

[Subaru: Let me say this right now, I feel just as strongly about Emilia-tan…… wait, you just tricked me into saying that, right?]

[Emilia: Yes, I was being mean. Sorry]

Sticking out her tongue, through that one act she forgave it all.

In front of Subaru, who couldn't help but make gargle sounds with his throat, Emilia said [But…] looking up at him,

[Emilia: The one you're even more worried about is Beatrice, right?]

[Subaru:……Unless, Emilia-tan, are our hearts connected to each other? The "GOOD END" is already in sight!]

[Emilia: Usually you would go "There's no way I'm worried" even though you are, but today, you didn't even say that. It must mean you are really worried]

Being hit right on the mark, Subaru almost let out a "Guu", and bit his lips with a vexed expression on his face.

But he quickly snapped out of it, and

[Subaru: Worried? I'm not worried or anything. It's just, breaking off with a fight like that, I couldn't meet with her again afterwards. So leaving the Mansion without seeing her again left me with a bit of a bad feeling, that's all. Yeah, just a little bit. Just that tiny bit, just the tip]

[Emilia: That sounded a bit dirty to me, maybe I'm thinking too much into it…]

[Subaru: You're not imagining it, that was just me]

Hiding his happiness at getting the reaction he was aiming for, Subaru looked at Emilia, who tilted her head, still smiling slightly as if not understanding a thing,

and

[Subaru: If Beako's hikikomori problem gets worse, being originally a hikikomori myself, I'd feel some kind of responsibility…]

[Emilia: Hikikomori…… Subaru, you know a lot about that right? Beatrice, is she coming out?]

[Subaru: It'd be really hard, actually. Without finding a good opportunity, just pulling her out forcefully isn't good, but then taking too much time would be indulging her too much. Those hikikomori are such a pain in the ass to…… Wait! I was one myself!]

After that stupid ending, he tried to correct the direction of the conversation again.

After all, since they were heading to the Sanctuary right now, it wouldn't be something they'll deal with until their return.

[Subaru: After I get back, I'll have to talk over a lot of things with Beako. Last time, I couldn't get her to tell me any of the things I wanted to know]

[Emilia: Beatrice and Puck, it feels like they know all sorts of things, and are hiding them from us]

[Subaru: I get the same feeling. Even with Frederica, but then, everyone associated with that Mansion has a habit of saying something suggestive and then leaving the answers out for later. It's like a disease already. Not the good kind of disease, either. And that Beako, returning the Gospel like that, saying

things that I still can’t get out of my mind…]

The Gospel, which Beatrice had thrown back at him along with her mystifying words, is currently safely in Subaru’s keeping. If it was just going to be a nuisance, he could have left it behind, but in the worst case, he could interrogate Roswaal about it, so he brought it along with him.

But because it was so creepy, he kept it at the very bottom of his bag, as if quietly hiding it from sight.

[Emilia: ——I think we’ve entered the forest]

Emilia, suddenly lifting her face, and brushing away the hair from her forehead, said this as she looked all around. Following her, Subaru also raised his head, but from inside the carriage he could not see it right away. Stepping toward the window and peeking out, it’s true that the colors outside had become deepened with green.

[Subaru: You didn’t even look outside but you could tell, huh]

[Emilia: Even though it’s mixed, it’s because I have Elf’s blood in me. They say that Elves are the race of the Forests, and so the Elves and the Forests have an inseparable bond——]

Then, just as Emilia said this with a fleeting smile,

A sudden, subtle sensation shocked Subaru’s skin, and he looked around to see what it was. But of course, the impact that surged through the surroundings, was not something his eyes could see.

Inside the carriage, the Divine Protection of “Wind Evasion” still separated out the rest of the world.

But,

[Subaru: ——!? Hey, hey!]

[————]

Emilia’s slender body was swaying powerlessly, and just like that, began to fall, and Subaru, sliding in, managed to catch her just in time.

Her momentum stopped by his embrace, lying feebly in his arms, Emilia’s eyes were closed, on her face was a pained expression as she lay faintly panting.

[Subaru: Wait, Emilia-tan!? What happened, Emilia!?]

Emilia couldn’t seem to reply. She looked as if she was in pain, but other than her shallow, accelerated breathing and her excruciating expression, there was no sign of fever or even sweating.

Lifting her up lightly in his arms, Subaru immediately realized he could not deal with this by himself. So, rushing to the front, he stuck his head through the small window connecting to the driver’s platform, and

[Subaru: Otto! Something’s wrong, Emilia suddenly collapsed! Do you have any medicine or……]

[Otto: Oh– Natsuki-san, sorry]

Subaru's impatient words trailed off. Otto, at whom he had thrown these words, had sweat forming on his forehead. Turning to Subaru, he replied with a voice that seemed to have lost all strength.

Subaru noticed two things— The first, was that the carriage had stopped. Patrasche and Furufu had halted their steps, and were standing still between the trees. So overwhelming was his emotion in the previous moments that had not even realized that the carriage had stopped, but now, there was another, even more serious problem.

That was the second thing he noticed,

[???: Just waltz'n in straight from th'front, y'got some nerve, stranger]

As if spitting out the words, unlike the literal content of what he was saying, there was not the slightest hint of friendliness in the way he said it.

With only this one sentence, one could almost grasp the character of the person who spoke those words.

True to that impression, the man flaunting himself in front of the dragon carriage looked exactly what he sounded like.

With spiky short blonde hair, a white scar prominent on his forehead, the sharp leer of his eyes did not lose to Subaru's in their viciousness, and like that of

a feline beast, the canine-teeth in his jaws peered out, exceedingly white. His curling, slouching back made him seem rather short for a man, but the darkly ferocious aura emanating from his entire body removed any inclination to underestimate him for his small stature.

[???: D'know where th'hell y'came from, but y'look like'a "stake goes through with'a brittle point" kind o'guy]

[Subaru: Huh, wha?]

Hearing a strange idiom he had never heard before, Subaru only let out a confused moan, but his opponent, listening, must have taken it for fear, and with a dismissing laugh [Hah],

[???: Oh? Y'scared eh. But's true y'struck some bad luck. After all, th'place y'tried t'sneak into was'a place, an'what's more, y'ran right into ME]

The man laughed viciously, clacking his fangs as he laughed, and, putting his fists together, he lowered his stance, ready for battle. And in that posture, he looked up with a glare at his silent adversary,

[Garfiel: Meet'n up with GARFIEL was th'end of y'luck. Now GET WRECKED like'a "PAZO-MAZO RIGHT AN'LEFT"!]

The punk who named himself, cussing incomprehensibly, thumped his foot into the ground.

And the moment after, the overwhelming impact, as if reversing the world, struck Subaru.

Chapter 07 [The Trial Grounds]

The moment the punk pressed his foot into the ground, Subaru felt the illusion as if the world had tilted.

Of course, in reality, such a thing could not possibly happen. Even the largest human could not hope to disturb the foundations of the world with a simple stamp of the foot, and the sheer weight of the earth would not budge so easily.

So, the tilting of the world can only be Subaru's illusion.

What had actually happened, was that starting from the point where Garfiel's placed down his foot, a wave spread out in the ground, and like flipping a piece of tatami, it tossed the dragon carriage into the air as it passed.

[Subaru: Impossible—— Uwah!?]

Like on the end of a see-saw, the sensation of upward momentum reached its peak, and then, as if floating, the dragon carriage glided through the air. Along with the ground dragons Patrasche and Furufu, just about exceeding one ton in weight combined, they were all blown flying. Inside the carriage, Subaru only held Emilia close within in his embrace.

Then, just like that, the dragon carriage slammed onto the ground, the sheer force of the impact sent its entire frame, inside and out, gnashing and creaking

against itself. It was a high-quality dragon carriage. Its luxury did not stop at its glamorous appearance, for its quality was evidenced both in terms of comfort and durability, and this was demonstrated perfectly by the fact that it managed to avert total destruction just now. But still, in the half rolled over dragon carriage, there was no way to immediately escape.

In other words, since escape is no longer an option, the only choice remaining is to stand and fight.

[Subaru: Damn it, what was th——]

Shaking his head, which was still hanging out of the window to the coachman's platform, Subaru held a hand to his aching forehead. He had struck his head on the way down, but fortunately, other than the pain, there was no lesion or bleeding. Suddenly remembering, he looked down, and saw, lying in his arms, Emilia was unharmed.

A surge of relief washed over him, but this emotion was soon replaced by the anxiety of being reminded that the culprit who caused this was still outside.

Quickly lifting up his head, the dreaded sight that met Subaru's gaze was——

[Subaru: Patrasche——!!]

Screeching, fangs bared, the enormous jet-black ground dragon leapt toward the scrawny figure.

Making use of the loosened connection to the dragon carriage, with a twist of her body, Patrasche broke free and with rapid movements she set off against the assailant for a counter-attack.

With pointed fangs as sharp as blades, the power of her jaw can slice through human flesh and crush through bone and still have strength to spare. With speed like the wind, she aimed for Garfiel's neck, about to tear it to shred without a single question asked.

[Garfiel: Excitin' choice. Good groun'dragon…… No, yer a good girl, aren't ya. Hell, "the sound o'breaking bones' a sign o'love" astheysay]

[————!]

Lodged in her closing jaws, was the front end of an outstretched arm that should by all accounts have been completely shredded.

Garfiel had held out his right arm against Patrasche's bite. And the ground dragon, zeroing in on the target, chomped down on the wrist, ripping the forearm arm clean off, and then fell upon the torso… or at least, that was what should have happened.

But instead, Patrasche froze in place. Not only her body, but even her jaw clamping on the arm lodged inside stopped moving completely.

Was some special ability being used, or was it caused by magic?

This question turned in Subaru's mind, but soon, Garfiel's action answered his doubts. Expanding the muscles of his lodged arm, it completely overpowered the force of Patrasche's jaw, stretching it open wider and wider.

[Garfiel: G’job, you. Got goin’ right away, and still not givin’ up, even better. Y’passed!]

[————!]

The jet-black ground dragon lowered her body, still clenching with her mouth she twisted her waist. The strength of her jaw sealed on the man’s right wrist, she swung her tail whooshing upwards to swipe him flying. Subaru took a blow from her tail once, but, watching Patrasche’s movements now, it’s immediately obvious how much she had been holding back that time.

Literally putting her whole body behind the blow, she directed all her hostility into striking the body that was left completely open. But even so, it was casually stopped in its tracks by Garfiel’s left hand.

A dry cracking sound rang out, and after the shock dissipated, all that remained was a hand grabbing onto the end of a tail. His right hand in her jaws, his left hand holding her tail, Garfiel smiled, revealing his beast-like fangs.

[Garfiel: Won’t hurt ya. Sleep tight]

Making a wide swing with his arm, like some kind of joke, the circular trajectory of its motion carried Patrasche’s massive body gliding through the air. Then, all of a sudden laterally spinning with an inconceivable sensation of weightlessness, Patrasche’s eyes filled with confusion as she was gently tossed to the ground.

Her massive body barely bounced as it landed, and then silence: Patrasche had been defeated. In front of this scene, Subaru’s parched throat let out a groan of

disbelief,

[Subaru: H, he threw Patrasche?]

[Garfiel: Such'a loyal nature. Tossed y'out gently, shouldn't hurt. Let's finish this before ya get up!]

Disregarding the stunned Subaru, Garfiel lifted up his face and hopped onto the coachman's stand. Lying on the slanted coachman's stand was Otto, in a broken-looking posture, and he tried to stand up as the attacker leaped over.

[Otto: Guh…… but, don't underestimate me! I am a traveling merchant you know! I am totally prepared for getting mugged by thugs on the road during my business. So come on, but if you rather not fall victim to the "Suwen-Family-Ryu-Thug-Repulsion-Technique" I suggest you surrender now…… Hoowah!]

[Garfiel: Shut up, ham. What d'ya think yer doin with yer weakass skills, takin me on? Go take'a nap]

Right after striking a fighting pose, full of spirit, Otto instantly crumbled when Garfiel, suddenly coming up to him, gave him a flick in the forehead.

The flick —— or more accurately, the close-range middle finger strike, with what sounded like tremendous force, sent Otto's wiry body flying off of the coachman's platform. Holding his forehead in what looked like agony, he passed out without a word. Regardless of whether he was dead or alive, he was no longer an obstacle.

[Garfiel: Now, by th'looks of it, yer the only one left]

Snorting, the punk turned with a sharp look that could cut a man in half, murmuring.

Standing on the coachman's platform, the distance between him and Subaru was only about four paces —— but considering the way he had instantly closed his distance with Otto, there might as well be no distance between them at all.

Gasping down his breath, Subaru racked his brain but could not think of a single plan to break through. The only fighting force that might have been able to resist this man, Emilia, was still unconscious after her inexplicable collapse. But no matter what happens, he must protect her.

[Subaru: I'm……]

[Garfiel: "Flip it this way or that yer skin's still blue", I don't wanna hear it——!]

With the sound of a light tap on the floor, in the blink of an eye, Garfiel's short figure appeared in front of Subaru's face. Above, the raised arm had its five fingers spread open, and it was easy to imagine the future where the claws would swing down, ripping his stunned body apart.

And in the face of that future where his limbs would be ripped apart, there was only one thing Subaru could think to do: to prevent the damage from reaching Emilia in his arms, and to protect her with his life.

[————!]

——A few seconds passed, or perhaps it was longer.

His eyes tightly shut, shielding Emilia with his entire body, the time Subaru spent waiting for the shock to come dragged on to the point of confusion. Then, hesitantly opening his eyes, he found the five fingers spread out motionless in front of his face. Behind it, there was a perplexed look in the punk's eyes.

Keeping his gaze on Subaru, who could not help but hold his breath, he twisted his own head from side to side, making loud cracking noises with the bones in his neck.

[Garfiel: Instead of striking back y'prioritized protectin' the girl, the hell was that. After yer dead she'll be next anyway. Wasn't that a terrible decision?]

Being hit with a sound argument that he really didn't want to hear, Subaru, going through all sorts of reasons, couldn't come up with a reply. The silence making him even more displeased, Garfiel waved his sharp-clawed hand.

[Garfiel: Well, yer too slow anyway. Make a move or not, there probably wasn't much hope. You're all pretty useless either way]

[Subaru: Y, you are……]

[Garfiel: Hah?]

Remarking on their ineptitude, Garfiel gave out his merciless assessment. And as Subaru was trying to move his frozen throat, attempting to squeeze out a question, Garfiel's vicious-looking face twisted up with displeasure, and moved in even closer to Subaru's face.

[Garfiel: You're whisperin, gotta speak up. C'mon]

[Subaru: You are Garfiel…… correct? You are acquainted with Roswaal and Frederica?]

[Garfiel: ——Frederica?]

Confirming Subaru's word, for the first time, Garfiel's expression lost its aggression. Looking astounded, like a carnivorous beast that had lost the scent of blood, for an instant, he seemed almost cute and tame, but, immediately concealing it again with a bitter expression,

[Garfiel: Why d'ya know that name …… No, wait. That woman you're holdin', is the silver haired…… Half-Witch?]

[Subaru: She's a Half-Elf. Don't you dare use that name in front of her]

[Garfiel: ——Hyah. Whatsthiswhatsthis, y'got some spirit got allofasudden]

Glancing down at Emilia, Subaru suddenly exploded back at the utterance of that derogatory name. The fear of moments before all disappeared in the face of pure rage, and Garfiel, hearing this, clicked his fangs together noisily, full of glee.

[Garfiel: Say, isntshe that rumored Emilia-sama? Now, a "Half-Witch" showing up around here could only have everything to do with Roswaal]

[Subaru: Son of a……]

Ignoring Subaru's previous words, Garfiel said "Half-Witch" again with special emphasis. Hearing this, Subaru stood up, but was immediately stopped by Garfiel's hand.

[Garfiel: "The dumbass who bites on molten iron only gets hurt" right. You don have a chance against me. Look at the difference in strength eh? ——I don't want you to get hurt, y'know?]

Making a fist with his outstretched hand, he cracked his knuckle-bones as a warning. Their respective strengths are obvious, without knowing his intentions, it's better not to make things any worse by resisting. To press down his anger and wait for another chance to get his revenge, would be the wisest course of action.

That's why,

[Subaru: …Eat shit]

[Garfiel: Hah?]

[Subaru: I don't want to get hurt. And you'll beat me up pretty easily I guess. But. ——I can't stand by while you continue to say things that will make this girl sad]

Gently laying Emilia down on the luggage stand, lightly touching the hair on her forehead, Subaru stood up staring at Garfiel at a distance so close that their foreheads almost touched. A distance within each other's breaths, a distance within each other's reach.

[Subaru: Take back that bullshit name… and never use it again]

[Garfiel: ……You want me to do what you say? But you don't got what it takes, do you? Your face, your gut, your shin, you want them all to get wrecked, yeah?]

[Subaru: Go ahead and try. But don't expect me to go down for free, though… If you punch my face I'll bite you, if you strike my gut I'll grab you, if you hit my shin I'll spit on you, and I will be paying you back tooth for tooth]

Responding to intimidation with intimidation, Subaru was carried up by the surge passion burning in his chest. In front of him, the hostile aura quietly emanating from Garfiel sent shivers circling all over his body. Quite literally, Subaru could be flicked away in a second if Garfiel wanted to. Judging from his offense and defense so far, this was all too obvious.

Of the strongest people Subaru had met in this Parallel World up to now, Garfiel might easily hold a place among them. Perhaps without reaching the level of Reinhardt at the pinnacle, he could, nevertheless, conceivably take on Wilhelm or Julius.

So even as Subaru's words took back a little bit of ground, the probability of him actually retaliating was really equal to zero.

But still, Subaru and Garfiel stared squarely into each other's eyes.

Even knowing he will lose, he refused to back down… because the reason he cannot back down was just behind him…

[Garfiel: ——Hihaha]

[Subaru: ——Hah?]

…It was an unexpected voice that sounded completely out of place.

In the middle of their standoff, Garfiel's laugh leaked out, cutting into the space between them. Subaru let out a confused groan, and Garfiel responded with his action,

[Garfiel: Hiyahahaha! Yer prettygood with words eh. Y'reallydiditdidntyer!]

[Subaru: Wha…… Ow! Hey, wha wait, ow, st-, ow that really hurts!]

Breaking out into a wide laugh that shook his shoulders, Garfiel heartily patted Subaru in the shoulder. But even without the slightest hint of hostility or intention to attack, and even as he was holding back, the gesture, purely seeking friendly contact, was nevertheless cutting down Subaru's health points in large chunks at a time.

[Garfiel: G'job, y'passed! Went straight through! Th'Half-Witch…… Half-Elf, though I don't like'em much, you have guts protectin her, I'll respect that]

[Subaru: It's good you came around…… But it really hurts! When are you going stop patting me? Are you trying to kill me!?]

His enthusiasm unabated, Garfiel's arm dropped, and Subaru moved a bit further away. Seeing this, the punk tilted his neck, then crossed his powerful arms, and,

[Garfiel: So cold. All that stuff is water under th'bridge now, so c'mon and forget it already. When a man acts petty it means his thing is petty too, y'know]

[Subaru: That's the first time I heard you use an idiom that sounds familiar…… but my thing is totally none of your business! A-n-y-w-a-y!]

Garfiel shook around a little and gestured with his finger. But seeing him lift up his chin looking smug, Subaru threw his words back at him roughly.

[Subaru: You're Garfiel, and acquainted with Roswaal, right? Even though we had a fright when we came into contact all of a sudden, there's no more hostility between us now, right?!]

[Garfiel: Will ya quit making a fuss, it's getting annoying. Don't panic I won't eat ya]

[Subaru: Who do you think will believe that after that savage attitude a moment ago haaaah……?]

Sticking his fingers in his ears with irritation, Garfiel responded to Subaru's objections with a [Y'got a point I guess] as if understanding him. Even though he's incomprehensible sometimes, it's a great relief to see that they can communicate with words. And then, having escaped the dire circumstances, Subaru remembered,

[Subaru: Yeah…… Hey this is no time for that! Emilia collapsed all of a sudden, what am I doing talking normally just now]

[Garfiel: Collapsed, y'mean the Half-Elf? Oy, of course she collapsed. Where do you think this is? What you panickin' about?]

Rushing over to Emilia's side, he found her still asleep and breathing irregularly, as if in pain. As Subaru was worrying by her side, Garfiel didn't seem to think much of it, and only shrugged. Noticing his knowing expression, Subaru asked [What do you mean?], which brought an incredulous frown onto Garfiel's face,

[Garfiel: Y'already heard from Roswaal and Frederica what this place was, right? They must have…… No way, y'don't know?]

Even as he was just beginning to explain, Subaru shook his head from side to side, and Garfiel clicked his tongue in frustration. Spitting out [Th'pervert bastard……], it was easy to see who that insult was referring to.

[Garfiel: Frederica didn't say anything either? That's messed up, before y'know it her personality'll become like her owner's. Hopeless]

Shaking his head, Garfiel snorted out in irritation. Then, noticing Subaru's questioning eyes, he raised up his hand and said [Yeah I gettit I gettit], and,

[Garfiel: It looks pret'bad, but her life's in no danger. Only, if you don't want to see any more of that pain on her face, we needa get goin' right away. I'll guide you up to th'village]

[Subaru: When we move from here, her consciousness will return?]

[Garfiel: That's what I been sayin' isntit. Hurry up, we're gonna go, oy, how

long are ya gonna keep sleepin? Get up]

Even though there wasn't much explanation, Garfiel didn't seem intent on explaining further. Turning around without even trying to conceal his thuggish expression, he went out and gave Otto a kick. Receiving the kick, the "still-passed-out" Otto let out a painful yelp [A-uu].

[Garfiel: Yer the driver aren't yer, son of'a. I'll set the turned'over carriage upright, and y'drive it up to the village. If yer slow I'll kick yer ass flying, yeah?]

[Otto: Say, what's with this situation!? Following what I just heard, I get the feeling I'm just on the losing end of everything!]

Hearing this unacceptable version of things, Otto boiled, suddenly standing up to voice his objection to Garfiel. Considering the beating he got just a few minutes ago, this must have seemed tremendously courageous, and Garfiel, who appeared to share this opinion, turned to look at Subaru,

[Garfiel: Oy. This guy, is he always such an energetic bastard?]

[Otto: If you ask that guy there's no way you'll get a proper appraisal so please stop that! Can't you just make your own observation of what I am! And apologize! Please apologize!!]

[Garfiel: Hah!? The hell, son of'a bitch's healthy lively all of'a sudden, ya underestimatin' me? Yeah I beat up a guy that didn't need a beatin', get over it!]

[Subaru: Can the two of you shut up! Emilia is still in pain, hurry up and grab the reins! And you, get the dragon carriage upright!]

While the three men were making a commotion, and started cursing at each other on the coachman's stand… placed aside on the luggage bed, Emilia, who had been unconsciousness up to now, still didn't wake up. However, a faint frown was stirring up on her pretty face, irritated by the noise,

[Emilia: ……Shut up]

She murmured in a little voice, as if talking in her sleep.

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[Garfiel: Didn't introduce m'self did I? Name's Garfiel…… Ah, just Garfiel 's good. The strongest man alive. Need anything, just ask]

[Subaru: Oh, I'm Natsuki Subaru …… Eh? What was that? You said you're the strongest? Are you saying that sober?]

As the dragon carriage got moving, sitting face-to-face inside, Subaru and Garfiel exchanged their self-introductions. Seeing Subaru suddenly pull back his outstretched hand with an astonished look, Garfiel also took on an incredulous expression,

[Garfiel: Isn't that what I said? What's so strange 'bout that?]

[Subaru: No no, I just never expected to meet someone who'd straight-out say "I'm the strongest man alive". Even so, isn't saying that going a bit too far?]

[Garfiel: Y'don't think I'm fit to be the strongest?]

[Subaru: Well you're very strong I'll admit, but if you're talking about the absolute strongest, how should I say it…… No matter what, I have a guy who always comes to mind]

The form of that red-haired Knight emerged in his thoughts… compared to Garfiel in front of his eyes, Subaru's mind tried to work it out. From their previous exchange, with just his bare hands, Garfiel was a formidable fighter, and could kick a house flying if he wanted to—— No, he had flipped the carriage upright with a stamp of his foot just now. But would all this be enough to contend with the Sword Saint, after all?

Even with this in mind, Reinhard's advantage doesn't seem to disappear, and Subaru himself wasn't exactly sure why he held that Knight in such special regard.

[Garfiel: Hah, as you like. I'll correct your mistaken view sooner or later, and prove with my own hands that I'm the strongest. For now, let's just say "Th'red nosed sealion's afraid o'th'cold", and think of it like that]

[Subaru: I totally don't know what you just told me to think about……]

Subaru tilted his neck at that last part, and Garfiel didn't seem to be planning to explain it, and instead crossed his hands behind his head and relaxed his weight onto the back of his seat. Anyway, their conversation having come to an end, Subaru looked out the window, and brushed his fingers through Emilia's silver hair as she slept in his lap.

While Emilia has not woken up, her expression had become more restful than before. Just as Garfiel said, moving away from that place seemed to have a positive effect. So then, the next thing on his mind was,

[Subaru: Ah, I didn't get a chance to properly ask before but, you're a close acquaintance of Roswaal…… aren't you?]

[Garfiel: You must've heard my reputation, right? I'll say this one more time then, out of all the people associated with Roswaal, I'm by far the strongest]

[Subaru: That's not really the point…… But I do remember hearing you are an influential person, though]

Unless brute-force was the only reason he was considered "Influential"? Unlike what Subaru had expected, Garfiel was not much of a supporter in the political sense, but would perhaps be more of a supporter in the muscle-brained sense.

With the Sanctuary not far ahead, picking up someone who he at once needed to be cautious of, and who he could have friendly interactions with, really only added to the headache.

[Subaru: That's just more questions I'll need to ask Roswaal at the "Sanctuary" I guess. You know I'm supposed to be solving problems, but it feels like the number of questions just gets more and more as I go, what's with this?]

Hugging his own head, seeing the difficult road ahead just getting more difficult, Subaru's expression clouded over. Listening to this, Garfiel made a small click with his tongue, revealing just a small glimpse of his sharp canine teeth,

[Garfiel: “Sanctuary”—— eh]

Sensing some meaning in his murmur, Subaru’s face raised up, and Garfiel gently waved his hand. Then, he stood up, facing the direction ahead, —— that is, towards direction of the Sanctuary.

[Garfiel: It’s because you’re gulping down Roswaal’s words whole without’a second thought, that you keep callin’ it by that name. Things you don’t know aside, the things he did tell you are all full of shit y’know that right?]

[Subaru: Even though I have the same opinion, it’s not good to gossip behind someone’s back…… Say, did he piss you off or something?]

Garfiel became visibly displeased upon hearing the word “Sanctuary”. Subaru wondered if he misspoke, and waited, but the reaction was more extreme than he anticipated.

That is, Garfiel twisted his mouth into an ironic smile that did not seem to fit,

[Garfiel: Well well, it’s about time the princess-sama wakes up now. Since we’re pretty far from the barrier]

[Subaru: What’s the barrier…… Ah, Emilia-tan?]

Just as he was about to ask his question, Subaru saw Emilia turning over in his lap and called out to her. She opened her eyes faintly, and looked around the inside of the carriage hazily. As though she wasn’t completely awake yet, she stared at Subaru with her violet eyes,

[Emilia: Morning, Shubaru……] *(not a typo :3)

[Subaru: Just waking up is suuuper cute, Emilia-tan, but maybe now's not a good time. How are you feeling, does your head hurt?]

[Emilia: Ehh, not at all? I don't feel strange or anything……!]

In the middle of her answer Emilia suddenly became wide awake, and got up so fast that Subaru had to dodge his head backward. After being an inch away from banging their heads together, Subaru looked back at Emilia, who didn't seem to have noticed how close it came,

[Emilia: A,are you alright, Subaru? I said I will protect you but I passed out……]

[Subaru: I managed it somehow, so there's no need to worry! We came to an understanding through dialogue. People form ties with each other through conversation, and we took the first step in that regard. Though I ran into some communication problems at first……]

As Emilia was shoving closer and closer, Subaru touched her shoulder to try to calm her, while observing her as he spoke. It seems she could stand and walk, and the movements of her eyes and the color of her complexion, and her words and her voice were all impeccable. Also, super cute. Just like always.

[Garfiel: Right? Just like I said, yeah?]

And, as if waiting for Subaru to settle down, Garfiel laughed. But hearing this,

Emilia suddenly jumped up in surprise, protecting Subaru behind her, as if only just now noticing the existence of this new stranger in the carriage.

[Emilia: ——Who are you!? I warn you, I won't let you lay a single finger on Subaru]

[Subaru: Emilia-tan, it's alright! Also would you please stop reinforcing my role as the female-lead please! My gauge can't take much more of it!]

Pulling Emilia out of her combat mode from behind, Subaru turned to Garfiel and introduced him,

[Subaru: That's Garfiel…… Right after Emilia-tan collapsed, he atta…… I mean came to ride on the carriage. Not that he's welcome or anything, but he's coming along until we get to the "Sanctuary"]

[Emilia: ……This is Garfiel? The person Frederica mentioned?]

[Garfiel: Well I am curious what she said about me, but we can put that off till later. Look, we're coming up to th'village soon]

Hearing Emilia make the exact same comment as Subaru did earlier, Garfiel jerked up his chin without giving them time to organize the situation. He gestured, and ahead of them, the forest was opening up, and the form of the village that was their destination came into view——

[Garfiel: Be welcome, Emilia-sama and her entourage]

He addressed them with proper title —— however, his words did not contain any of the respect or favor, and had instead been served with more of a color of disdain, and a tinge of darkness.

Without realizing it, Subaru's gaze had turned severe, and confusion had emerged in Emilia's. Receiving both their gazes, Garfiel opened his arms wide, his attitude unchanged,

[Garfiel: The place Roswaal calls the "Sanctuary" or whatnot—— where half-wits are gathered to spend their days, in the impasse that is the Trial Grounds, each to their pitiful ends]

[Subaru: Trial Grounds……?]

[Emilia: Half-wit——]

While Subaru and Emilia are each drawn to a different part, Garfiel placed a hand over his mouth covering his canine teeth which were showing, smiling, as if to conceal a terribly complicated feeling.

[Garfiel: But we, the residents, call it "The Witch of Greed's Graveyard". Laughable, yeah? Heh…]

Echoes of laughter, as if in self-derision, quietly resounded in the car.

Low, and faint, like a curse, like a blessing, it resounded throughout.

Listening, Subaru only silently worried about the girl next to him.

If a Witch stands in front of her path again, he must be the one to put out the flames… firmly and resolutely, he told himself.

The “Sanctuary” approaches.

——To Natsuki Subaru, and to Emilia, it was to be a place that will alter their paths forever.

Chapter 08 [The Long-Awaited Reunion]

Even traveling on an unpaved road, there was hardly any turbulence within the dragon carriage. No matter how many times he experiences it, he'd always find the effects of this "Divine Protection" incredible.

If all this was just the effects of the Divine Protection of "Wind Evasion", he wondered what if he could unwind the effects of all the other Divine Protections, and whether he would be using some other word besides "incredible" to describe them then.

[Subaru: …or something, but this isn't the time to be running away from reality, is it]

Subaru poked his head out into the driver's area beside Otto, looking forward—— with the "Sanctuary" ahead, he focused his eyes on the sight.

Finally treading on earthen road that was no longer covered by grass, about a hundred something meters away, the forest was opening up. Some wooden rooftops were now visible in the distance, for they must have been the many surrounding residences the "Sanctuary". From far away, it looked rather like a run-down village, and there seemed to be nothing about it particularly worth noting.

And if one had to make a remark, perhaps it would be,

[Subaru: There's a dreary atmosphere about the place……]

Standing in the entryway to the "Sanctuary" was a tremendously old gate made of stone that only served to emphasize that desolate imagery, and the short wooden fences surrounding the village gave off an impression of a locked cell.

Inadvertently, Subaru allowed his thoughts to slip through his lips, and Garfiel, listening, smacked himself in the knee,

[Garfiel: Pret'much! Dreary place, yeah? I'll say this first, the insides're even more dreary y'know? No matter who it is, there's no liveliness inside, they're all alive but might as well be dead]

[Subaru: Sounds pretty crappy the way you described it. But the more I listen the less it sounds like a "Sanctuary". That's just…….]

Seeing Garfiel enthusiastically affirm his ironic comment, Subaru sighed, and thought back on his previous words. To Subaru and the others who were calling this place "Sanctuary", Garfiel did not hide a sense of self-deprecation as he spoke. So then——

[Emilia: "The Witch of Greed's Graveyard"… what does that mean?]

The same question that came into Subaru's mind seemed to have also arrived in Emilia's.

As she suddenly voiced this question her eyes became resolute, but down below, she was gently tugging on the hem of Subaru's clothing with her fingertips. The fact that she was relying on him gave him a small sense of contentment, but Subaru's feelings were complicated as he sensed the source of her anxiety.

[Subaru: The Witch——So basically, as the existence referred to by the name of "Witch", the Witch of Envy is known to everyone. But the Witches bearing the names of the other Sins, there's almost nothing known about them, right?]

[Emilia: Eh, really? But, weren't they a bunch of really famous people from 400 years ago?]

[Garfiel: Emilia-sama's not'ntirely mistaken. But yeah, Subaru's got it. The Witch of Envy's just way too famous, there's no confusion'bout that. But of th'records of the other Witches eaten by the Witch of Envy, there's barely a whiff left of'em. Though there are exceptions]

[Emilia: Just like here… right?]

After answering Subaru, Garfiel pulled in his jaw at Emilia's question, smirking. As if quite affected by this, Emilia's eyes widened, but Subaru, not well-informed on the matters surrounding the Witch, only let out an [Is that so…] as if understanding.

But a sudden notion surged in his mind that blew away that casual air. Because, if there are multiple Witches…

[Subaru: T, that doesn't mean there's a Witch Cult for every Witch, does it?

Just beating down one Sin Archbishop was tough enough, come on give me a break]

It was a chilling thought, and one he couldn't overlook.

Reading into the details Petelgeuse's words, he imagined they must all have been worshippers of the Witch of Envy. Likewise, "Gluttony" and "Greed" who Subaru must one day defeat, and their followers too, must all be in the same category as well.

Yet, if there are sects that worship the other Witches——

[Otto: It's a scary thing to be saying, but there's no need to worry about that, Natsuki-san]

But the one who banished the chill running up Subaru's spine, was the one holding the reins in front, Otto. In the end, compared to Emilia, who knows almost nothing about the Witch Cult, and unlike Garfiel, who was just not quite trustworthy, Otto actually held some kind of credibility, and could provide some insight into the common understanding of things. Because the extent of Otto's knowledge… was probably exactly what an average person would know.

[Otto: The Witch Cult…… even though I don't like to say it out loud, only worships the Witch of Envy. To revere another Witch above the Witch of Envy, only a lunatic would do that]

[Subaru: Above the Witch of Envy……? What do you mean? Are they even worse than the Witch of Envy?]

[Otto: When they hear the name of another Witch other than the Witch they worship, the Witch Cultists will do some very frightening things. You heard of the city that was destroyed in the Southern Empire of Volakia, right?]

As Otto suddenly brought up the new topic, Subaru remembered having heard it before. After the battle against Petelgeuse, Wilhelm had mentioned it as he laid out the horrors of the Witch Cult. Certainly it was,

[Subaru: It was the Sin Archbishop of “Greed” who single-handedly destroyed that city in the what’s-its-name Empire, wasn’t it? I heard that even the nation’s Champion couldn’t do anything to stop him]

[Otto: I don’t recall anything so fantastic, but the reason the Witch Cult did it in the first place was even more frightening. In the isolationist Volakian Empire, that was the only city where trade was prospering…… at the time there were rumors of a Witch-related artifact being unearthed there]

[Subaru: Related to the Witch, huh]

[Otto: What it was is unclear even now. Only, there were lots of collectors out there who were after it. It’d be fine if it was just for some sick sense of humor, wanting to collect something belonging to the Witch of Envy…… but in the end, the entire city perished because of it]

Perhaps it was to obtain that artifact, or to destroy it, that “Greed” made his move. The Volakian Empire had mistakenly roused the Witch Cult and received this catastrophic retribution as a result.

[Otto: After that, even things unrelated to the Witch of Envy, anything that

might possibly provoke the Witch Cult is prohibited by decree…… but even so, it still didn't stop these items from circulating in shameless behind-the-scenes dealings]

[Subaru: It's rare to hear that kind of spite from you. It almost sounds you were involved?]

[Otto: ……It's nothing worth mentioning. Just back then, some of my relatives were caught up in the city when it happened. It's been more than 15 years now, I was just a child back then so it didn't have much to do with me]

After that, Otto closed his mouth and refused to go any further on the topic. Seeing his attitude, Subaru stopped asking, and turned his gaze and attention back into the carriage.

In any case, Garfiel was waiting for Subaru to finish processing everything he's learned, saying [Satisfied now?] while holding his chin in his hand.

[Garfiel: I don'know the finer points either. But th'gramps an'grans keep goin on and on about how it's the "Witch of Greed's Graveyard", like how "Peromeo rots jus'from th'listenin", repeated s'many times, t'can't be wrong]

[Subaru: All you know is what the rot-guy told you? So you don't really know the details either, huh]

[Garfiel: Only thing I care'bout is me being th'strongest. If y'want to know the specifics go grab Roswaal by th'collar and ask'im yerself. N'sure if y'can do it now, though]

[Subaru: ——? What's that supposed to mea……]

[Otto: Um sorry. It seems we've arrived, do we just go in like this?]

Before he could sort out Garfiel's seemingly loaded words, Otto's voice hailed from the coachman's stand in front. Against Otto's call, Garfiel grumbled [Welp], and nimbly hopped off the carriage.

[Garfiel: If y'go in w'thout sayin'anything, they'll take ya for outside intruders an'coord'nate a mass'assault on ya, it'll be all like'a "laughin Magmarin full o'holes". I'll go in an'tell'em first, y'guys wait here]

[Subaru: Ah, we'll leave it to you then. Hey, come to think of it, I get the feeling like you're the patrol for the Sanctuary or something. Considering the way we ran into each other at first…]

On the other hand, the way he seemed to have abandoned his post in the end didn't quite fit that idea. And the fact that he was patrolling alone, too. But then again, with strength like his, perhaps moving alone was more efficient.

But to Subaru's last question, Garfiel only lightly waved his hand without answering. Unable to see through him, Subaru's brows furrowed, and, almost at the same time, Emilia let out an [Ah] in a slightly elevated voice.

Turning his eyes to Emilia, who had cried out involuntarily, he saw her pointing ahead. And, following her finger, Subaru immediately understood her surprise as he saw what she had seen. Because standing there, was,

[——You're back, Garfiel. Pretty early, isn't it]

[Garfiel: ‘Cus there’s no need t’circle in th’forest anymore. It’s gotta be rare t’see you leave Roswaal’s side though. He fin’lly dropped dead?]

[Ram: If that is so, this place, Ram will already have burned it down with her own hands in self-abandon. You have Roswaal-sama to thank that this is not the case]

[Garfiel: That’some incredible logics, I can’t understand it at all!]

Dressed in the familiar maid’s uniform, the girl’s peach-colored hair was swaying as she faced Garfiel. Unlike Garfiel, who was happily smiling, her expression seemed cold and without emotion. Taking a long time to confirm this, Subaru’s shoulders dropped as if relieved.

[Otto: Haaa, so that’s the older sister I heard so much about. I see… Of course this is only natural, but she looks exactly like the young miss who’s sleeping]

And having seen her for the first time, Otto let out this remark. In front of their eyes, she looked like a perfect replica of the Rem Otto had seen, but only, inside, it was a completely different person.

For this, was the long-awaited reunion with the good-for-nothing maid of the Roswaal Mansion, Ram.

[Subaru: ——Ram!]

Sticking his body out of the dragon carriage, Subaru waved to Ram. Her eyes slightly squinted as she saw him, and, quite understandably, she shrugged and shook her head.

[Ram: I humbly do not know where Barusu popped out from, but your late arrival is certainly disappointing. You should have noticed sooner that something had gone wrong and…… ah, but that's too much for Barusu's abilities, after all]

[Subaru: If you're going to use a phrase like "I humbly do not know", stick with that tone all the way and don't change it all of a sudden! And Roswaal too, I can't understand what you guys are thinking, but I'll definitely have something to say when I get a hold of him!]

Objecting, Subaru pointed a finger at the girl whose attitude had not changed at all. Seeing this reaction from Subaru, Ram dropped her shoulders, before turning to Emilia, who was standing beside him.

Relieved to see that Emilia, same as Subaru, was safe, Ram's face relaxed. And for a brief moment, in her eyes, Subaru thought there was a fleeting, almost dreamlike glimpse of sorrow. Yet, in that same instant, it had already vanished.

[Ram: Emilia-sama too, welcome. Roswaal-sama is waiting, so please come with me to the inner building. Garfiel, go find a suitable place for the dragon carriage and the driver]

[Garfiel: What's with that treatment, oy! Can't y'ask for help in a way that inspires more enthusiasm?]

[Ram: If you want to eat Ram's hand-made meal, please strive to do your best. But if you want to throw away this valuable opportunity because of your careless words, Ram won't say anything more]

[Garfiel: Alright! Alright already! Can't grab'a hold o'her at'all, though it's good like that. Oy, asshole driver. Park the ground dragons an'the carriage at the end there an'come wit me]

[Otto: It's about time I introduced myself right!? Could you please not call me with that insulting name!? Also, isn't it a bit dangerous for me to be left alone with this guy!]

As Otto voiced his objection at Garfiel, who had just been vanquished by Ram, Subaru, seeing this, shot him a thumbs-up with teeth sparkling,

[Subaru: I'll recover your bones!]

[Otto: That was definitely something said with good intentions but carries the completely wrong implications isn't it!? Really, if anything happens to me I'm going to claim for compensation!]

Leaving behind these words, Otto, having let Subaru and Emilia off of the dragon carriage, followed after Garfiel. Seeing them start off toward the interior of the village, Subaru rubbed Patrasche in the nose in a reluctant goodbye. Then, turning with a snap of his neck, saying [Now then],

[Subaru: There's a whole array of things I want to ask and talk to you about, now that we're here can we finally talk?]

[Ram: ……Ram hasn't been granted permission to convey anything to you. You can ask Roswaal-sama directly when you meet him. Though I don't know how much Garf had let slip already]

[Subaru: Garf…… ah, you mean Garfiel. That guy turned out to be a whole lot different from the impression I got from just hearing his name. Come to think of it, there's something that's been bothering me]

[Ram: What is it?]

Sharply, Ram furrowed her brows. Imagining it might be information Roswaal had given express instructions not to reveal, her gaze became serious, but, seeing this, Subaru let out a [Naah it's just], as he folded his arms,

[Subaru: That guy, does he have a crush on you? I got that feeling from the way he was talking]

[Ram: ……And here I was wondering what you were going to say]

Unable to hide her genuine astonishment, Ram sighed. Only, seeing how she didn't deny it, Subaru couldn't help but let out an out-of-place grin.

[Subaru: Well I'm not saying he has strange tastes but. You look cute…… but the fact that he still likes you after being around you for so long, I think he must have some serious resolve]

[Ram: Being gifted with both intelligence and beauty, males will inevitably be attracted to Ram, there's nothing I can do about that. But, Ram has already devoted her all to someone who she shall always stay devoted to, so I have no

wish for such things]

With a sway of her shoulders, Ram responded to Subaru's sarcastic words, and, in a single stroke, she had cut down all of Garfiel's hopes with her response. Then, turning her back to Subaru and Emilia, she left the words [Come with me], as she immediately took her step forward.

Although he wasn't exactly trying to make the flowers of love bloom, her cold attitude still made Subaru feel like he was coming away empty handed. But, the fact that he could not ask what he should have asked, was, understandably, because he was afraid.

[Subaru: At a time like this, am I still too much of a coward to say Rem's name… even though I want to… even…]

He was terrified of the confirmation.

Having already heard it from Emilia and Petra that they cannot remember Rem, now, to ask her own sister whether she has forgotten her existence too?

But, having come here, the fact that she did not ask about Rem's absence, already meant that there was no point in asking anymore.

[Subaru: Can't help but cave-in to her either way. Then let's follow Ram for now, Emilia-tan. ——What's wrong?]

Subaru turned to Emilia, who had kept her silence up to now. Ever since stepping off the carriage, she had not opened her mouth, but only looked around at her surroundings anxiously. Noticing Subaru's call, she let out a [No…] slightly shaking her head.

[Emilia: It’s just, I can’t seem to calm down. How should I say it, there’s a strange feeling…… it’s not something I can put into words]

[Subaru: Can’t calm down, huh. For me, a shy loner who’s reluctant to even leave the house, all this is like a new world you know? Everyone gets this feeling I think…… In fact, I don’t particularly hate it myself]

Looking around along with Emilia, everything looked very much like the image of a run-down village. Perhaps, compared to Arlam village, the houses appeared older, and in a greater state of disrepair, but these were merely relative, insignificant details.

Nevertheless, the place was not without a certain sense of incongruity about it. Although what that incongruity was, Subaru wasn’t quite sure either.

[Subaru: But we don’t have much choice even if we keep our guards up, Emilia-tan. Ram and Ros-chi are both here, so at least we shouldn’t be in any danger, I think]

[Emilia: It’s not that I’m keeping my guard up…… No, I’m ok now. But really, if only I could talk to Puck…]

The crystal stone at her chest——touching the green stone beneath her neck, Emilia called out anxiously to the name of the spirit sealed within. The absence of the great spirit that always stayed by her side obviously brought her anxiety to no end.

And to see her so fragile, Subaru despised himself for not being the existence that she can rely on.

[Emilia: ——Subaru?]

[Subaru: Let’s go. No matter what happens, leave it to your #2 shield]

Without thinking, he grabbed the hand that was touching the crystal, and turned his face away as he said this. Then, holding her hand like this, before she could even say no, he swung out his stride. And naturally, Emilia only followed behind his forceful attitude.

Having done so without any consideration, just the thought of his embarrassing act made fire fly out of every pore of his face. But, much more than thought, he had chosen to follow his emotion, and merely hoped that this was not seen as strange.

[Emilia ——Ok]

Only, unlike Subaru’s heart, which was about to jump out of his chest, Emilia slightly nodded, and did not let go of his hand.

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It was the only house in the Sanctuary that preserved some semblance of a proper shape.

Constructed out of stone, the single storey building was around the size of a single-family house of the original world. Its rooms arranged in a simple layout, one could almost imagine living an equally simple and cozy life here.

Although compared to the Roswaal Mansion and the Crusch Mansion, having grown accustomed to a certain standard of living, Subaru found it rather cramped. But, of course, in time, with a little bourgeois-spirit, he could easily grow used to living in such a place.

For this, was the impression of the place of their meeting.

So then,

[Roswaal: Yaaaa~~~, Emilia-sama and Subaru-kun. I~~ get the feeling that this is quite the long-awaited reunion, do~~n't you think hmm?]

With a carefree smile, and waving his hand at them, this was how Roswaal greeted them as they saw each other again.

After parting in the capital, this was the first time Subaru met face to face with Roswaal. And as they had not seen each other in the previous loops, it had actually been over a month. Considering all the pent-up resentment accumulated during that time, he had wanted to do nothing less than to punch him across the face at the earliest opportunity, but,

[Roswaal: Fi~~~rst of all, more than anything, it's so~ good to see you safe, Emilia-sama. Ram's already told me about the problems around the Ma~nsion. If anything should have happened to you, I would surely have lost the will to go on li~~ving]

[Subaru: If that's what you feel, you should have at least made some better preparations…… Actually, more importantly, what the hell happened to you?

What is this!?]

Even as Roswaal seemed relieved to see Emilia safe, Subaru and Emilia were beside themselves with consternation. For all the countless things they had wanted to say, had all of a sudden vanished like a parting mist when they saw Roswaal.

Lying on the bed… all manner of wounds that cannot be overlooked littered his body, as blood seeped through the bandages constricting his figure into a pitifully painful posture.

At Subaru's question and Emilia's silent gaze, Roswaal used his left arm, which was relatively less injured, to gently pull up the eye-patch that was covering his left eye.

[Roswaal: Aaa~~~yaaa~~, a~~re you asking about these? I~~ am only a man, a~~fter all. Being seen in this pitiful state wounds my self-esteem, so if you could please understand my desire to re~~st a little]

[Emilia: That's not good enough, is it. What really happened, Roswaal? Getting wounded like this…… and how did you, of all people]

Not distracted by his jest, Emilia retorted as she extended a trembling finger towards him, hesitating whether to touch the body ridden with wounds. Seeing her do this, Roswaal smiled bitterly, and turned his right eye up to the ceiling, [Well then…] he whispered,

[Roswaal: Whe~~re should I~~ begin hm? We~ll, I guess you could say my injuries were sustained for something of a matter of honor, and out of regard for

propriety, I had no~~ choice]

[Emilia: Stop trying to get away with these roundabout words. I am asking you seriously, Roswaal, so answer me seriously in return]

[Roswaal: ……My~ it seem Emilia-sama is in an especially bad mood. Bu~~t, considering where we are, there's no avo~iding it perhaps]

Even Subaru felt that something was out of place when he heard Emilia's relentless, inquisitive tone, and it was at the same moment, that Roswaal pointed this out. Emilia slightly angled up her eyebrows, but, realizing that what he had pointed out was true, she lightly bit her lip.

[Emilia: My head is all a mess, I can't calm down at all. What is this place? Even though it's called the "Sanctuary", I don't think that's what it is at all. Then this place is……]

[Roswaal: "A Witch's Graveyard", that's an easier name to acce~~pt, no?]

[——!]

The tone of Roswaal's voice dropped as he pronounced these words. The same words from Garfiel being uttered in Roswaal's mouth, the phrase suddenly took on a sense of some heavy and sonorous meaning.

Swiftly, Emilia shot her gaze toward Subaru. Seeing the complex tangle of emotions in her eyes, Subaru lowered his chin in a nod, in tune with her unease.

[Subaru: Hold on, let's get everything we want to ask in order first. If we go on like this, the conversation is only going to drift all over, and we won't get a single conclusion out of him]

[Roswaal: Ooh~ yaaa? In the short time we haven't se~en each other, you've gotten quite good at se~ttling accounts, no? Subaru-kun, just wha~t could have brought on this change in your state of mi~nd?]

[Subaru: If we're going to get into that it'll take a really long time, so I'll leave the bragging for after we've heard everything we want to know. Ah, right, there was just this one thing…]

Staring at Roswaal's mocking smile, Subaru lifted up a finger,

[Subaru: We've established the alliance with Crush-san, but you must have already heard it from Ram… you're glad you left me behind, aren't you?]

[Roswaal: ——Ve~ry glad. A~~fter all, I was right to have picked you up]

Seeing Roswaal relax the corner of his lips with satisfaction, Subaru sighed and closed his eyes. Subaru had anticipated this, but the fact remains, his actions were exactly as Roswaal planned. Even if he had already allowed himself to be used, it still wasn't fun to hear the confirmation.

Anyway, Subaru arranged his next thought,

[Subaru: Firstly then, the villagers of Arlam village. Since Ram is safe, they must be fine as well, and all evacuated safely, right?]

[Roswaal: You can rest assu~~red. Perhaps my current state doesn't give me much credibility but, I sti~~ll know my respo~nsibilities as Lord. Such thing as to risk my life to protect my subjects, I too have that resolve. I've seen to it that everyone's sheltered in the village's cathedral]

[Subaru: Cathedral… Ah, we can get back to that later, so the next thing is……]

He was relieved to confirm the villagers' safety. Since Subaru had only made the decision to evacuate along with the preparations beforehand, whether they were safe in the end was the final concern left over from the previous loops. ——Because no matter what, a part of that could no longer be redone.

Relaxing his shoulders, Subaru gave Emilia a look. And receiving it, she inclined her head, drawing back her slender chin,

[Emilia: Then, tell me about this place. You call it Sanctuary, but Garfiel calls it "The Witch of Greed's Graveyard". Just which one is true?]

[Roswaal: Both are true, Emilia-sama. This is the site of the once-Witch of Greed's ——Echidna's final resting place. And to me personally, it is a place that should called Sanctuary]

[Subaru: ——Witch]

[Emilia: Echidna……]

Hearing his answer, Subaru and Emilia's throats simultaneously clogged up.

Roswaal spoke quietly, and all of the clownish demeanor he had been using until now had vanished from his voice. Precisely because of this, for the first time, his words carried an unmistakable flavor of honesty.

Drawing in a deep breath, Emilia blinked a few times, and continued once more,

[Emilia: The Witch of Greed……was another Witch who was annihilated by the Witch of Envy, wasn't she]

[Roswaal: E~n, that is right. No matter where you look in the history of the current world, nothing remains of her name anymore. Only, except in the memories of those who knew her…]

[Subaru: Wait wait wait, but what you just said makes no sense]

Subaru interrupted Roswaal's solemn words with a quick wave of his hand. Roswaal narrowed his single eye, gazing into Subaru, who was little by little succumbing to the pressure of his aura.

[Subaru: If I remember correctly, the Witch of Greed……was defeated by the Witch of Envy 400 years ago. This place being the final resting place of a Witch from 400 years ago might be understandable…… but what you're saying is that you knew her in person, but that's just…]

[Roswaal: I~~ know this myself, but I~~'m afraid I can't say. Because this is passed down verbally through generation after generations of the Mathers family……only to the heir of Roswaal]

[Emilia: Passed down verbally…… then the head of the Mathers family of long ago was once connected to the Witch of Greed?]

[Roswaal: ——Echidna]

[Emilia: Eh?]

Suddenly, hearing the name brought up, Emilia's eyes opened wide. Roswaal turned his gaze towards her, and, as if to confirm once more, quietly whispered, [Echidna],

[Roswaal: Ple~ase, call her by name when referring to her. A title like "The Witch of Greed", no matter you how say it, carries an evil impression about it, do~~n't you think? And it's so long, too…]

[Emilia: …I see. So then, Echidna met her end in this village, and this village has then been managed by the Mathers family for generation after generation…… is that right?]

[Roswaal: E~n, that is correct. Though managing implies more hands on work tha~n there is. Echidna's influence remains thickly here, and without the proper steps, it'd be impossible to set foot in here. The fact that you were able to enter…… must have been thanks to Frederica's assistance, isn't that so?]

Receiving a nod of affirmation in return, a sense of understanding emerged in Roswaal's eyes. Seeing this, Subaru pursued the topic,

[Subaru: I understand this is Echidna's grave, and under your management. But what I don't understand is its purpose, and why you and the villagers haven't returned yet]

[Roswaal: I may have just said some strange things, bu~~t you seem to have accepted them quite rea~dily. The fact that this is a Witch's Graveyard, I~~ had really wanted to keep that a secret…]

[Subaru: Maybe if it was the Witch of Envy, but I really have no idea what the Witch named Echidna had done. Just the word "Witch" immediately gives the impression of some kind of villain. But then it's the same thing with "Half-Elf", and who could have guessed that Emilia-tan is so cute just from that word?]

[Emilia: ……D, d-don't say irrelevant things like that. Surprise-attacks are off limits you know!]

Hearing the pick-up line casually inserted into the end of that otherwise serious sentence, Emilia, whose face had turned bright red, lightly yanked at the side of Subaru's waist. Subaru smiled wryly at her totally cute retaliation, but then, he noticed Roswaal in the corner of his eyes giving off a rather annoying laugh [Oho~],

[Roswaal: In the sho~~rt time you've spent apart, you've grown quite a bit closer, ha~ven't you. After leaving with that fight in the Capital, I was wondering just what would happen, but it seems now it's even better than befo~~re]

[Subaru: That's the love received at the end of a long and arduous journey, you know! There's a mountain of things I can brag about, but let's leave that for after you've finished answering our questions. So, what is the purpose of this place, and why haven't you returned]

[Roswaal: It seems you aren’t the naive child anymore, and has become quite dependable indeed. So~~ then, the re~ason the villagers and I have not returned…… simply put, we can’t return even if we wa~~nted to]

[Subaru: Can’t return even if you wanted to?]

Unable to understand his answer, Subaru furrowed his brows.

Roswaal nodded, and smiling at the question mark emerging on Subaru’s face, said,

[Roswaal: Because right now, every o~~ne of us, and the residents of this village included, are all in a state of house-arrest. A~~~nd, from the moment you entered here, it seems you two are also in the sa~~me situation]

Chapter 09 [The Graveyard]

[Subaru: House arrest now…… that's an unsettling word……]

Facing Roswaal, who was lying on the bed, Subaru barely managed to wrench out these words while carefully analyzing the sentence which had just been spoken at him. Judging from the flow of the conversation, he might normally have laughed it off as a stupid joke, but unfortunately, in the current circumstances they appeared to be authentic. At any rate,

[Emilia: So then, does that mean the villagers here gave you these injuries?]

Emilia seemed to have arrived at the same opinion as Subaru on the general believability of his words.

Bound in bandages seeped in blood, Roswaal's body was in a pitiful state. Seeing him like this was at least proof that some of what he said was true, and was the reason why it could not simply be laughed off.

[Subaru: If there's someone in the village who could give such serious injuries to Roswaal, that means we're in a pretty serious situation……]

Touching his hand to his jaw, while tracing over the respective strengths in his mind, Subaru felt a burning sense of unease in his chest.

The existence of Roswaal L. Mathers, besides being Subaru's patron in this parallel world, was a powerful magic user at a level only very few others could hope to reach.

In fact, the strength of the man who occupied the position of Head Magician of the Royal Court of Lugunica was such that even a hundred Subarus would not have a chance of winning against it, and could easily annihilate a horde of Mabeasts while humming. To think that he would end up in this state……

[Roswaal: Ah, but it seems like you misundersto~od. My wounds weren't infli~~cted by~ anyone. There's no need to be on guard for anything strange, or plan any kind of revenge for my sake, o~k?]

[Subaru: Don't worry. You haven't saved up enough positive impressions for me to go off recklessly seeking revenge…… But more importantly, what is that supposed to mean? That's different from what you just said. Aren't you supposed to be under house arrest……]

[Roswaal: Considering that I'm injured and being restrained like this, calling it house arrest is not wro~ng, surely. It's not that I was injured in the process of being restrained, I was injured, and the~n restrained……. Though if I were to explain it in detail, it would be a li~ttle different]

In response to Roswaal's round-about manner of speaking, a question mark flew out of the top of Subaru's head. Breaking everything down, he managed to calm himself and sorted through the context of what was said, and in other words,

[Subaru: So the people of the sanctuary have nothing to do with your injuries, is that right?]

[Roswaal: Strictly speaking, one can't exactly sa~y that they're unrelated, but if you were to ask me whether they were directly responsible for my injuries then the answer is no. In other words, tha~~t's how it i~~s]

[Subaru: In other words, they're indirectly related then]

Roswaal inclined his head, and for a moment appeared to be embarrassed by Subaru's analysis. Then letting out a small sigh, [It's like watching a child grow up, I guess…], he joked.

Seeing that attitude, Subaru took it as a sign that he was coming closer to the truth. Determined not to let up his questioning, he chose his next words and prepared to throw them at Roswaal, but…

[Ram: ——Barusu, how about showing Roswaal-sama a little bit of care?]

Saying so, Ram, who had not been present until now, interjected herself into the conversation. With the hem of her skirt lightly swinging, the girl crossed the room with graceful steps, and placed the steaming set of tea she had been carrying on a tray neatly onto the table.

Its fragrance spread throughout the room, and with the stimulation of his olfactory senses, Subaru only now realized how inconsiderate he had been. For just when he was about to pursue his questioning, he suddenly noticed just how severe Roswaal's wounds actually appeared.

[Ram: Pressing Roswaal-sama so hard when he's so severely injured, digging to the bottom of everything, are you satisfied? Look at Roswaal-sama suffering,

almost crying, have some sympathy]

[Subaru: Just when you've made me reflect on my actions… don't say something that ruins the mood! I mean, is this supposed to be him hurting and about to cry? Doesn't look like it to me!]

[Roswaal: Uuuuh, it hu~~rts, I'm in pa~~in. Words lacking in kindness and concern hit me right in my wooounds…]

So Subaru responded to Ram's words with a brash retort. As if mocking Subaru's remarks, Roswaal started a little performance on the bed. As Subaru's eyebrows started to twitch in annoyance, Emilia cleared her throat and pulled the room back from the turbulent atmosphere.

While drawing the eyes of all three people in the room to her, she started with an [In any case]

[Emilia: Anyone can tell that Roswaal isn't well just by looking, so let's finish this conversation quickly. You haven't had healing magic cast on you?]

[Ram: Magic that heals is outside of Ram's area of expertise, so……]

In response to Ram's expressionless, yet somehow clearly regretful answer, Emilia looked at Roswaal with eyes which held only little expectation. Seeing this, Roswaal waved his raised hand from side to side,

[Roswaal: I too, am specialized in destruction magic yo~~u see. If it's to do with destroying, harming or deceiving I can generally do pretty much anything, but I'm hopeless when it comes to spells related to healing]

[Subaru: That's a sad way to put it. Rather than just offensive spells, you should make sure to practice with some defensive spells as well, jeez…]

That said, whenever Subaru played a game in which he had to decide on his character growth, he was the type of super offense-focused player who would only pick attack-oriented skills. So he couldn't scold Roswaal too harshly.

At the same time as when Subaru reached this strange acceptance, Emilia sighed [it can't be helped], and,

[Emilia: Puck isn't here so I'm not at my best, but I'll cast the healing magic. I have to concentrate while I do it though, so we'll have to finish talking first]

[Roswaal: The Great Spirit-sama…?]

Shocked at the information Emilia had just spilled, Roswaal quickly raised his eyebrows, then narrowed his eyes. That somewhat cold expression, unlike the usually relaxed demeanor, was one which Subaru had rarely seen. He unwittingly contracted his shoulders and said [Oy oy]

[Subaru: It's rare to see you with a serious expression. Is it so surprising that Puck isn't here? I hadn't realized that you were actually a closet mofumofu fur-enthusiast……]

[Roswaal: Unfortunately, the only time I have gotten close enough to Great Spirit-sama to be able to touch it was when I respectfully offered it ma~yonna~~ise. It was really scary. ——Anyway, I~ see]

Without even ignoring Subaru's banter, Roswaal narrowed his brow in rumination. While doing this, he suddenly turned his yellow left pupil onto Emilia,

[Roswaal: Emilia-sama, you aren't feeling ill, or different from normal in a~~ny way, right?]

[Emilia: ……? Other than Puck not showing his face, not really. Puck not coming out started a little while before we reached the Sanctuary too, so… Ah, but there is one thing]

Raising a finger as if asking a question, Emilia then proceeded to quickly whip her gaze around at their surroundings ——Not only inside of the room they were in, but seeming as if she was looking over the entirety of the Sanctuary outside of it, and after doing so, she said in a lowered voice,

[Emilia: Since entering the Sanctuary… No, maybe ever since entering the forest, I feel like the responses from spirits have become dull. And just now, when we were just outside, I…… felt a strange gaze on me]

[Subaru: A strange, gaze?]

Surprised at what he heard, Subaru inclined his head, to which Emilia responded [Yes] and pulled in her chin in confirmation. After explaining that this was the reason why her expression had darkened after they parted ways with Garfiel and the others earlier, she continued,

[Emilia: It felt like I was being stared at. It felt reeaaally unpleasant… I thought it might just be me, so I didn't tell you]

[Roswaal: Neither of Emilia-sama's fe~elings are mistaken. This is a place which is unpleasant for the spirits, and further, its inhabitants harbor nothing but unple~asant fe~elings towards you]

In response to Emilia's anxious words, Roswaal poured out a stream of words devoid of any consideration. Seeing her eyes hurt and wavering, Subaru instantly turned on Roswaal and was about to open his mouth to object, but,

[Garfiel: Well, how 'bout y'leave it there. You shouldn't be so hard on'a wounded man. "Th'running spotted-beak's hot now" isn't it]

[Subaru: I guess that's true unfortunately… not that I'm understanding enough of that to say I agree. But this is just a tiny complaint, we've totally established a translatable communication between us, haven't we?]

Looking over his shoulder, Subaru shrugged as he saw Garfiel leaning against the door, baring his teeth. Seeing his reaction, Garfiel made a noise grinding his teeth, and looked around the room.

[Garfiel: Granny's home's supposed th'most spacious and proper one here, but with so many people, it gets cramped, huh. Guess I was right to leave that noisy guy behind]

[Subaru: Now that you mention it, I don't see Otto around… Did he go home? Did you eat him?]

Emilia looked shocked at Subaru's question, but Garfiel laughed out loud and slapped his knees, as if he'd just heard an amazing joke.

[Garfiel: I do have the blood of'a carnivore, but I don't think I'd eat him. Especially 'cause that guy seems like he'd get even more noisy when I'm eating him. He said something about being worried about the dragon and the cart…… Well, he pretty much jus' came up with some excuse and legged it]

With one arm swinging, and strutting over brutishly, Garfiel plunked himself down on a chair near the wall, and looked up at Ram, who was watching him sideways,

[Garfiel: Tea]

[Ram: I will go outside to collect some fallen leaves, so will you please wait for me?]

[Subaru: Even though I have a suspicion, but, what will you be doing with those fallen leaves?]

[Ram: I have no intention of wasting precious tea leaves on the sort who has no understanding of neither fragrance nor taste. That is Ram's answer]

Having stated this in cold blood, Ram then earnestly went out the building. Pointing a finger up at Ram's back, Subaru looked at Garfiel, wordlessly asking [What do you like about her?] In response to that, while chasing her back with his look,

[Garfiel: Strong-willed women are worth the chase, ain'that so? And being a male, getting strongly attracted to excellent female ain't such'a strange thing]

[Subaru: Stuff like males and females, we're not talking about telling chickens apart, so don't keep using that. In spite of everything, Ram is a proper young woman, you know. Calling her that……]

[Garfiel: Huh? What're you sayin'? I'm treatin' her as properly as any woman could ask to be treated yeah? Also, before that we……]

As Subaru offered his frank advice on his unusual way of speaking, Garfiel frowned as if he just noticed something, and raised his eyebrows. His face then took on a displeased expression, and he turned a gaze filled with swords onto Roswaal on the bed,

[Garfiel: Son of'a, y'haven't told 'em yet? If it wer' jus' you gettin' crumpled I'd brush it off as a joke, but, since that Half-Elf….. since Emilia-sama's come here, it's a whole different matter]

[Emilia: ——Eh?]

Garfiel had put his annoyance to his tongue and stamped it out. Emilia was surprised at hearing her name come out in the middle of his remark. But, with no regard for her astonishment, Garfiel snapped at Roswaal with an expression that was even more overflowing with anger than before.

[Garfiel: The moment Emilia-sama entered the Sanctuary, we got caught up in this mess y'know. Watcha gonna do about it? Ya haven't even begun to go into the main issue here yet. Son of'a, did ya'll jus come here to fool around?]

The latter half of his anger wasn't just directed at Roswaal, but at Subaru and Emilia as well, who had also gone silent. Particularly, the rage dwelling in the look

he aimed at Emilia was no laughing matter, and as if to protect her, who was pulling her shoulders closer together, Subaru stepped forward.

[Subaru: Hold on. I get that you're angry, but I don't even have a clue why. You'll just get more and more angry if you keep talking to someone who hasn't got a clue, right?]

[Garfiel: But that's what pisses me off. When the person all this is about ain't even got a clue……]

[Subaru: But the one disregarding "the person all this is about" and talking over her head is you and Roswaal over there, isn't it? If you really are concerned with that problem and want to do something about it, fulfill your responsibility to explain it. Expecting us to get it without explaining anything makes you just as shameless as I was just a short while back you know]

As he was facing him, Subaru felt the pressure coming from Garfiel getting a whole level stronger. Garfiel's stature was smaller than Subaru's, and as he was currently sitting, the height difference was quite significant. In spite of this, the smallness of his stature was almost unnoticeable. No, considering the density of the pressure emanating from him, to Subaru, Garfiel appeared to be something like a massive boulder.

Knowing that Subaru was naturally chicken-hearted, averting his eyes and taking a step back would only have been expected,

But,

[Emilia: Subaru…]

Tightly, Subaru felt a delicate finger entangle itself onto his sleeve. The sound of a voice seemingly devoid of confidence calling him slid past his earlobes, and invested his trembling knees with renewed strength.

Emilia was standing behind him. Relying on him in her uncertainty.

As if he would really let his knees buckle in front of her, could he do something as lame as that?

[Garfiel: ——Tch]

They exchanged a stare in silence, and the first to avert his gaze was Garfiel. As he clicked his tongue, and entrusted his weight to the back of his seat, he stuffed his finger into his short, golden hair, and began to scratch at it violently.

[Garfiel: Aaah! I know, I was jus' takin' it out on you. I snapped, I said I'm sorry, oy!]

[Subaru: No, you haven't really said that. But before that, didn't anyone ever tell you you have a really annoying personality?]

As quick as he was to become emotional and shortsighted, he was just as quick to take back his rationality and acknowledge his faults. Subaru thought that personality must be so rough to have, and rather than indignation he put on a wry smile.

Seeing this, Garfiel let out an unbefitting sigh [Haaa],

[Garfiel: Shut up, I'll be quiet, so get the conversation going in the meantime, 'cause if I join in, the talk ain't gonna go nowhere and it'll become annoying]

[Subaru: The fact that you've analyzed yourself this well, but then went all the way around without changing anything… I find that pretty amazing]

[Garfiel: Complimentin' me's pointless, since I don't really understand complicate things. Tuch]

Seeing Subaru go from exasperation to admiration, Garfiel snorted. Just then, Ram, returning from outside, handed him a cup of steaming tea.

[Ram: This is the definition of low-grade tea]

[Garfiel: Shouldn't you usually speak a bit more politely when giving someone something?]

Ram replied with a [Is that so], and handed the cup over with a composed expression. Garfiel received the tea, and, even though it was probably burning hot, poured it all down his throat in one go. Although he was carnivorous, apparently he didn't have a sensitive tongue. Seeing him empty the whole cup in one gulp, Ram let out a deep sigh.

[Ram: As usual, you are a man who has no regard for tea. That doesn't suit Ram]

[Garfiel: But it just tastes like leaves. If yer want to whet yer throat, water's the

same. Right?]

[Subaru: While I agree that tea tastes exactly like leaves, I can't help but have some reservations against such an extreme argument. Ram, how about letting him drink the other cup of tea?]

As Subaru pointed it out, Ram handed the other cup of tea to Garfiel. Its wavy color faintly resembled something along the lines of "Autumn Leaves", and even having noticed this from a distance, Subaru couldn't stop himself from… well, recommending it.

Its wavy color faintly resembled something along the lines of "Autumn Leaves", and even having noticed this from a distance, Subaru couldn't stop himself from… well, recommending it.

[Garfiel: Hey, you're pretty sensible after all, aren't ya. You get that just one cup isn't enough…… Pfft! Haah!? Ooy, you… isn't this one just leaf water……?]

[Ram: If it wets your throat, whether it's water, tea or leaf water it's all the same, correct? Since you've already put it on your lips, go ahead and drink the whole thing. If you leave anything… I will twist it off]

Without saying what exactly she would be twisting off, she shot a sharp glare at Garfiel's crotch. Just from that, Subaru realized that her target was the vitals, and unconsciously closed up his legs at the sense of danger. Garfiel reluctantly emptied the cup of its contents, wringing at the bitterness. And on the side, Roswaal, who had so far only been observing their conversation, suddenly spouted,

[Roswaal: Aaa~~ha. Are a~ll of you even worried about my condition and have any intention of allowing me to rest? Or is it your actual plan to make me laugh and o~pen up my wounds? If that's the case, you're certainly succee~ding]

Saying so, Roswaal lightly touched the bandage wrapped around the upper part of his head while grinning bitterly. In fact, one could see a faint red color beginning to spread across the white of the fabric. Just then, the mood of the room, which had been relaxed up until now, turned, and Ram, whose face had changed colour, approached Roswaal. She then covered his hand, which was pressing down on the wound, with her own, and

[Ram: I'm very sorry, Roswaal-sama. Even though Ram was by your side……]

[Subaru: Wasn't it your tea-jokes that made sure he would laugh?]

His disruption was silenced by a rock-shattering glare from Ram, and Subaru zipped it, and took a quick look at Roswaal's condition. At least, the bleeding didn't seem to be connected to anything serious. The wounds must have only stopped bleeding recently ——in other words, now was probably the most important time for his recovery.

[Emilia: Roswaal, I think it'd be best if I treat you after all…]

[Roswaal: No~~, that would not be necessary, Emilia-sama]

Reaching the same conclusion as Subaru, spirits emerged in the air surrounding Emilia as she stepped toward Roswaal. But, she was stopped by Roswaal himself shaking his head. The spirits, which were shining with a blue-white phosphorescence, wavered, as if affected by their mistress' uncertainty.

Watching the side of Emilia's fair cheeks, Subaru noticed.

——As the emerging spirits floated around Emilia, for reasons Subaru could not understand, Garfiel stared at her with eyes of frozen emotion.

[Roswaal: After all, right now, there's something much more important than my trifling i~njuries. It's not like my li~fe is in any danger, so please prioritize the other matter first]

[Emilia: Even if you say that, there's no way I can do that. When there is a person who's injured, to set that aside for something else would be…]

[Roswaal: Even if I tell you this is necessary in order for you to sit upon the throne?]

Emilia's usual rhythm shattered, and the scene of her about to heal him by force if necessary, froze up. Listening to Roswaal's statement, Emilia's cheeks grew stiff, and her violet eyes opened wide. The yellow left eye watching this in front sharpened as if peering into her, gleamed enigmatically,

[Roswaal: To the house of Mathers, this "Sanctuary" is just a piece of land which had been passed down through the generations, but to Emilia-sama's future, it is of profound… yes, of profou~nd significance. Therefore no matter what, I certainly intended to eventually invite you here. ——It's just, you showed up a little earlier than I had pla~nned… no?]

[Emilia: Necessary for me……? Hey, what is that supposed to mean……]

[Roswaal: The problem with this “Sanctuary”, and Emilia-sama’s problem are intimately tied. So perhaps, in this place, you would find it. Emilia-sama’s support, that is]

[——!?]

Frozen in place, Subaru watched as Emilia’s expression changed. Having prompted this change, Roswaal observed her expression, and seemed to take it in as if all was according to plan. On the other hand, Subaru, still unable to pick up the exchange of emotions between the two, was left with an itch in his teeth.

However, before that agitation could be turned into words, Roswaal pointed to the silent Garfiel.

[Roswaal: Your designation, Garfiel. Guide these two to the “Sanctuary.” ——Rather, the tomb]

[Garfiel: ——Heh, that a good idea?]

Swinging his emptied porcelain cup from side to side on his finger, Garfiel let out a low laugh. In response to being questioned, Roswaal drew in his chin and gently caressed Ram’s peach-colored hair as she changed the bandages around his wounds.

[Roswaal: First and foremost it is crucial to understand the situation, a~fter all. Explaining the circumstances and the other matters can come a~fter the Sun has set, but that is not the case for the tomb]

[Garfiel: Ah, that’so, the Sun’s going down soon. Won’t be so simple once that

happens. Alright, I'll take up guiding for ya]

Standing up, Garfiel placed his cup onto the chair he'd been sitting on, and turned to face Subaru and Emilia. Looking at the two whom the talk revolved around, but had been left out entirely, he slanted his head and opened his mouth to bare his fangs,

[Garfiel: Don't look so dumb. If you don't wanna become "like the rampaging Hoikoro from yesterday" or something stupid like that, we better get going]

[Subaru: Wait, wait, wait! We're not following the conversation at all. I wasn't even done talking to Roswaal in the first place, you know. At least let me finish that before……]

[Ram: His wounds have opened. Changing his bandages and letting him rest is the priority now. Barusu should do as Roswaal-sama instructed, and head to the tomb up ahead]

Subaru tried to put up a fight against Garfiel's forcefulness, but that was intercepted by Ram's commanding voice. She faced him with her usual cold gaze, and placed a hand on bed,

[Ram: Calm down, let us talk once night comes. Roswaal-sama isn't going to run away or anything like that. But if you don't visit the grave before sun-down, that is going to run away.]

[Subaru: I've never heard of such an energetic grave in my life!]

While scratching his head in resignation, Subaru felt Emilia's gaze piercing into

the side of his face. Her eyes were flickering with feeble emotions, and she seemed to be leaving it up to Subaru to decide what they should do.

To stay here and finish their conversation with Roswaal, or to be swept along by his will and be led to the gravesite by Garfiel. ——The answer has been decided.

[Subaru: I understand. We'll go to that grave place. It's necessary, isn't it? We'll certainly have you properly answer our questions once we get back]

[Roswaal: So~rry, that the situation has become like this. O~nce night falls, we can discuss all sorts of things, mu~~ch more thoroughly]

Hearing Subaru's opinion, Emilia relaxed her shoulders, and Roswaal nodded with satisfaction. Garfiel and Ram also seemed to accept it, and the two of them began to move onto their respective tasks. However, before that, Subaru said [Just one thing], raising a single finger.

[Subaru: Before heading to the grave, there's something I want to ask you.]

[Roswaal: Mmm~~? I don't really mind? If it's something I can answer simply, you can go ahead and ask me a~nything]

[Subaru: Well then, I'll take you on your word. ——"Rem", have you heard that name before?]

Pretending to change the topic, Subaru pronounced the vital question. On hearing Subaru's question, the first to react was Ram. But, it was not an answer he had hoped for.

When the name entered her ears, Ram angled her head as if she had heard an entirely unfamiliar term. As Subaru's hopes dropped, Roswaal quietly mumbled the name over again in his mouth.

[Subaru: ……Well?]

[Roswaal: Omu. Sorry, but it doesn't sound too fami~liar. I get the feeling it sounds similar to Ram's name but, ma~ybe if it was mispronounced]
***fami~liar. >_<

[Subaru: Is……that so. No, that's all. If you don't remember, there's nothing. Nothing you can do]

Turning his head to the side, Subaru accepted that answer.

Ram and Roswaal's reply had shattered the faint expectation in Subaru's heart. To Rem, they had been the two people whom she had spent the longest time with, for whom she would have given her life, and whom she had admired and loved. And they had forgotten her.

Taking in the reality of this fact, the air within Subaru's heart settled. And he soberly acknowledged it.

——That in this world, the only one who could remember her, was himself.

[Emilia: Subaru, are you alright?]

With a worried voice, Emilia softly touched the end of Subaru's sleeve. Savoring the gentleness of the tip of her finger, Subaru, not wanting to let her see the darkness on his face, closed his eyes, then forcibly lifted his head.

[Subaru: I'm alright. It's not like I had any special expectations. I more or less knew it would be like this. ——What I must do, one way or another, I already have that resolve]

[Emilia: En. Let's find a way. I will help too]

Emilia nodded at Subaru's determination, and pledged her unreserved support. As the heart that had been shattered recovered in her gentle regard, Subaru shrugged up his shoulders.

[Subaru: When Rem wakes up… my love won't be wholeheartedly directed at Emilia-tan anymore… won't you get jealous?]

[Emilia: Subaru's feelings for me, if it diminishes, then maybe… But it won't be like that, right? My share and Rem-san's share, you've already said you have them all properly planned out and everything…]

In response to Subaru's flirty banter, Emilia made an unexpected retaliation. Scared witless by that retort, Subaru couldn't utter another word out of his mouth, and her face only slightly blushed, and said with a soft smile,

[Emilia: Let’s go, Subaru. I want to let Ram meet Rem-san soon too]

[Subaru: A, aah, yeah. En, that’s right]

Even if Ram could not remember, it would be a reunion with her twin sister. Would that reunion call back memories, or send some shock-waves to the lost love they once had for each other.

Even such a fragile hope, he will cling onto it so long as there was still meaning.

[Ram: Barusu]

As Emilia followed Garfiel out of the room and Subaru turned to follow as well, he was stopped by a call from behind.

Looking over, it was Ram who quickly approached him. While taking into her hands the replacement bandages for Roswaal’s wounds, she came close to Subaru’s side.

[Subaru: What is it? If you’re planning on some Bandage-Play, after we leave you can have Roswaal all to yourself……]

[Ram: Only Emilia-sama is to enter the Tomb. Burusu must never enter]

Ignoring his joke, Ram’s incisive tone crushed Subaru’s attitude aside.

Ram’s voice was lowered, and had told him in a volume that even Roswaal

could not hear. Seeing Subaru's furrowed brows, just in case, she said it once more.

[Ram: ——If you do not wish to be ensnared by the deranged will of a Witch, do not, under any circumstances, enter the Tomb]

She repeated it once again.

※※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

——The air inside the Tomb was frigid and clear, and, quite literally, a cool otherworldliness accompanied the atmosphere that greeted Subaru.

A step, every step he took rang out an echo from the soles of his shoes, and, regardless of whether he had wanted to or not, asserted his presence in this place. But even so, the sound of these footsteps gave him an unexpected sense of calmness.

——Because in the darkness which did not even allow him to see a few meters ahead, in the miasma in which his very own existence was in called into doubt, even this sound had become a consolation to him.

Unaware of where he was, the walls which had been his only source of reference had long disappeared. Walking on and on, had he almost reached the end of his path? Subaru felt the illusion as if he had stopped still.

But the sound of his footsteps refuted this. Within the certainty of the resonance of these footfalls was Subaru's existence: the reality of his steps were guaranteed, and relying on just this small consolation, he continued onward.

How much time had passed, it was impossible to tell in the darkness. Even his thoughts became vague, and his throat, which had already given up on calling out, froze. Walking on like this, exhaustion did not come to him, but because of this, the sensation of his limbs began to blur as well.

Regardless, he walked on. He must walk on. He must not give up.

He forbid himself to stop. Walk, continue walking. Even crushed under the weight of his baggage, he must clench his teeth and walk on.

Otherwise, how would he ever face her——.

[???: ——I see, so that is your core. Very interesting indeed]

A sudden voice rang out, and just as abruptly ended, to be lost forever into the falling of the curtains.

The unimaginable darkness which stretched on no matter which way he turned, in an instant, became bright as day, and the narrow stone corridor transformed – to be wider than the ends of the world. The earth piled beneath his soles snuffed out the sound of his steps, and an air of filth which, above anything, brought nausea to his chest, sprawled throughout.

Completely different from the world up to now, was an ancient ruin befitting of reality—— a scene which he felt he might have seen before he entered the Tomb, panned out, and Subaru lost his words.

In front of him, someone suddenly approached. That is——

[???: Apologies for such a ludicrous welcome. I didn't intend it to be like this, but no matter what, this body is a thing of Greed, after all. The desire to know is… impossible to escape]

Pure white, like a field of the first virgin snow, was the white impression of that girl.

The long hair draping over her back shone like the reflection of snow in a daydream of pristine white, and the few patches of skin that were showing were just as translucent, and beautiful. A radiance of wisdom lighted up her eyes; she wore on her body a simple ink-black dress, and the display of the two colors adorned the polar extremes of her beauty.

Anyone who had eyes would probably be captivated by such beauty—— but instead, what gripped Subaru's entire body was an overwhelming horror that he had never felt before.

Even the sense of pressure he had felt on his first encounter with the White Whale, could not compare to this.

Before the speechless Subaru, the girl shook her white hair, and narrowed her eyes, and then, as if understanding him, nodded lightly.

[???: Excuse my rudeness. I haven't even introduced myself. It was so very rude of me, please accept my apologies. It's because I haven't interacted with anyone for a very long time, I haven't recovered my voice, it seems]

Unlike the tone of her voice, the girl’s expression barely changed as she softly shook her head.

Then, looking at Subaru, who had been frightened into silence, the girl held a hand over her chest in a sign for him to calm down.

[Echidona: My name is Echidona. The one called the Witch of Greed, do you understand?]

Chapter 10 [The Incarnation Of The Thirst For Knowledge]

——Since they left the house where Roswaal was recovering, about 15 minutes had passed.

[Garfiel: We're here. It's called the graveyard but it's jus' a lame ol' grave]

Saying this, Garfiel jerked up his chin to point at an old ruin on the verge of the Sanctuary. Constructed from an assembly of stones, the architectural style was primitive, and quite far from the impression of anything magical.

It is unknown just how many years had passed since it had been built, but from the cracks that littered the face of its walls, and the remarkable density of the sprawling ivy, it must have been something from over a century ago.

The entrance of the ruin was in line with the forest, and most of the building was engulfed into the trees, making it impossible to guess the true size of the structure at a glance. If this was the burial place of the "Witch of Greed", then perhaps it could be thought of similarly to a great pyramid of the original world.

[Subaru: A powerful person wanting to sleep in a large tomb; this is the same for all Ages, and in all Worlds, huh……]

Touching his chin and ruminating on these thoughts, Subaru tilted his head to the grand scale of the building.

Being someone who lives in the moment, Subaru wasn't all that interested in what people would think of him after his death. But then again, the fact that he wasn't an important enough person to leave any real trace in history, probably contributed to the development of this view.

Anyways,

[Emilia: It's good that we got to the grave, but what are we supposed to do here?]

Standing next to Subaru, Emilia looked up at the ruins, and asked Garfiel this question with a puzzled face. Subaru had the same question as well, and directed his gaze onto the back of the blonde youth guiding them here. In response to this, Garfiel clacked his canine teeth as he looked back,

[Garfiel: You can hear the details from that bastard Roswaal after you get back. So fer now, what I want Emilia-sama to do is just to get inside]

[Emilia: All I have to do is go inside? Don't I have to do something once I'm inside?]

[Garfiel: Now the Sun's still up. Even if ya get deep inside the Tomb, the "Trials" won't start. Ya got no preparations or anything, and first you gotta check out whether you have the qualifications] ("Trials" 試練 is the same word used by Petelgeuse in Arc 3. Some anime subtitles may have translated it as "Ordeals")

[Subaru: Wa wa wait, wait a second! You're jumping all over the place. Trials or preparations or qualification, there's no explanations at all!]

Cutting in front of Garfiel, who might decide to forcefully push Emilia inside, Subaru called out to his responsibility to explain. But Garfiel only showed the irritated face he had already shown so many times in this last hour, and wrinkling up his nose,

[Garfiel: Yeah who cares, what's the problem? Go in, and afterwards when you get back to Roswaal you'd understand everything. If ya make me explain all that stuff, I'll make mess of it and ya' won't understand a thing]

[Subaru: It's like you're forcing us to sign a contract without reading its contents here, there's no way in hell we're going to do something like that. If you're bad at organizing words, then just answer my questions one by one properly]

[Garfiel: Uugh…… yeah, whatever. I'm stuck with ya til sunset, so make it short]

Slightly spreading out his arms, it seems Garfiel swallowed his proposal. Relieved that they were finally able to get some discussion going, Subaru wondered what he should ask first —So then,

[Subaru: This is the "Graveyard"….. meaning the grave of the "Witch of Greed", is that right?]

[Garfiel: That's what I heard. Actually, I got no idea whose bones're buried here. This place is the grave of the Witch of Greed, 'least that's what the guys at

the village told me]

The rather half-assed reply gave Subaru the feeling that something was out of place, but he gulped down this sense of incongruity for now. Then, picking up on some words from his earlier remarks….

Two terms that seemed to be of particular importance were “Trials” and “Qualification”.

[Subaru: The “Trials” that will start inside the Tomb, what is that? I have to admit… from my experience over these past few weeks, I don’t have a positive impression of that word at all]

[Garfiel: Calm down, being tested and all that, I don’t like it either. So, ah, the about the “Trials”……I don’t know any details]

[Subaru: Oy]

[Garfiel: Don’t get angry, I’m not playin’ aroun’ here. Just, I know it happens inside the Tomb. And those who can’t clear those “Trials”, won’t be released from the impasse of the trial grounds]

[Subaru: Release……who?]

[Garfiel: The ones who possesses “Qualification”. Guys who’re qualified can’t get out of the trial grounds. Long as the “Trials” aren’t completed, the Witch’s desire to possess will not let go]

It was a flimsy answer, but Garfiel didn't seem to be distorting the topic on purpose. Having digested the contents as best he could, he had said exactly what he understood. But still, if his statements didn't answer anything on-point, it's probably because his own understanding was vague in the first place.

However, connecting up the fragmented answers from just now, Subaru managed to form some kind of an understanding of the current situation in his mind. So, the answer he got from combining the scattered pieces was,

[Subaru: Only those who are qualified may enter the tomb, and if a person with qualification cannot clear the Trials, they cannot get out of the Sanctuary…… is it like that?]

[Garfiel: Ah……? Somethin' like that…… I guess?]

[Subaru: I thought I digested a lot but still it's still pretty useless……]

Twisting his neck, Garfiel, who probably still didn't understand, gave back this unreliable reply. Reserving his attitude for now, Subaru turned to Emilia beside him. Taking in Subaru's gaze, Emilia voiced her conclusion on the matter, which was

[Emilia: Earlier, when I entered the Sanctuary, my consciousness suddenly died out…… was that, what this is?]

[Subaru: That was the barrier, and when she passed across the range she fainted? Well, Otto and I were all good and healthy……]

[Garfiel: That's probably cuz you got no qualification]

Just as Subaru understood the answer to the reason behind Emilia's sudden collapse, Garfiel interrupted, pointing one finger at Subaru, and at Emilia with another,

[Garfiel: Emilia-sama, bein' a Half-Elf, has the qualification. But, Subaru, bein' a straigh' up pure-blooded human, doesn't have the qualification. So y'can go in and out freely. But, y'can't take the Trials]

[Subaru: Wait wait hold on. So then, considering those lines, is it something like this?]

Holding his breath, Subaru organized his thoughts. Then, recalling their conversation on his first meeting with Garfiel, and as he guided them to the Sanctuary, Subaru noticed it.

[Subaru: The ones who can take the Trials are Half-Elves…… or, half-bloods between humans and demi-humans. So that means the people living in the Sanctuary are all like that?]

[Garfiel —Aah, I didn't mention this yet did I]

Listening to Subaru's answer, Garfiel nodded looking satisfied, and blinked.

In the next moment, opening his eyes, his pupils had turned gold, and thin like those of a carnivorous beast. The tips of his canine teeth grew, and the nails of his raised claws sharpened like blades.

An illusion of his small body getting larger — rather, it was no illusion. His short blonde hair had grown so much that it covered his back, and the same golden hair grew on his exposed arms and legs, covering up everything.

[Garfiel: I also got a whole lot o' those blood left in me. "Atavism" 's my specialty]

[Subaru: ……Woooow. Can I snuggle in it?]

Racking his brains searching for a way to hold back his excitement, Subaru stuffed his hands into his armpits to conceal the shaking of his fingers. But that request had to be canceled seeing Garfiel had already returned to his original shape. Having witnessed Garfiel's shapeshift with her own eyes, Emilia gasped in her breath, and took a step forward,

[Emilia: So, after all, this village is a gathering of demi-human species……]

[Garfiel: More accurately speakin', it's a collection of mix-bloods between human and demi-humans. For th'love of it, all sorts of races o' people like that're gathered here. I'd say that Roswaal bastard has a "Demi-Human Fetish" or something]

[Emilia: So that's why Roswaal said something like that. That for me, this place is……]

Saying so, Emilia placed her hand on her lips and sank deep into thought.

For Subaru on the other side, this information wasn't very light to take in either. In any case, this meant that the people of this place, even though the

details may vary, all had this one thing in common with Emilia. Emilia's past, of being shunned, and rejected, perhaps they could understand that pain,

To her, perhaps that may just be licking old wounds. But, if there were others who could support her in this way, what would she feel about that?

He knew her scars, and wanted to caress them, but Subaru, never having experienced the same pain, could not possibly know how to heal them without opening them up instead. All this, had haunted his mind.

[Subaru: That's an unexpected flow of things, but I understand the circumstances of the village and the qualification now. So then…… the problem is with the Trials. You said you don't know the contents, but at least know that is going to happen after sunset, right?]

[Garfiel: Yeah, that's the thing. I don't know the specifics either. Only that you're here to check if ya qualify, at least. If you came here at night, the Trials would start, and that'd be the real deal]

Pointing to the ruins with his thumb, and nudging to Emilia with his chin, Garfiel revealed their current purpose. Nodding to what he had just heard, Subaru gazed up with his mouth open, at the Tomb which was waiting.

Tangled in dense, festering ivy, the thin darkness of the sickly air beckoned, waiting for them. The term "Trials" only served to deepen this solemn impression, elevating it in his thoughts to something more than an expedition into an old ruin.

And, more than anything, that he might possibly be sending Emilia into a place

of danger — this fact, was unbearable to Natsuki Subaru.

[Subaru: Sorry, Ram. Looks like I'll be going against your warning a lot sooner than I thought]

[Garfiel: Y'said somethin'?]

[Subaru: Suddenly getting Emilia-tan to venture inside gives me so much anxiety it breaks my heart. So first, for scouting and sacrificing purposes… shouldn't Garfiel rush in first?]

Lifting up a finger, Subaru made his suggestion. Garfiel looked blank for a second, and then gave a broad smile and once again slapped his laps while making a dry sound with his throat, and,

[Garfiel: Isn't that normally the place where ya say "I'll go!" to show off?]

[Subaru: I do want to say it, and I do want to show off quite a bit, but if something happens to me, the probability of me surviving is way too small, so I think you're more suitable for that. Seeing you can crush the ground with a stomp, you can probably come back alive pretty easily. You're the strongest, after all]

[Garfiel: Uh? W, well, I am the strongest. Don't know 'bout the Trials or anything, but no matter what kind danger falls out, I'd be like "Penipeni never yields" and all that!]

What exactly he was holding on to was unclear, but Garfiel was in a good mood, rubbing himself under the nose, and there was no need to pour cold

water on that, so Subaru didn't say anything. But then, that good mood quickly evaporated, and Garfiel went on [But then]

[Garfiel: T'bad I can't go in. 'S cause of my contract or somethin']

[Subaru: ……Contract?]

[Garfiel: Yeah, it's annoying as hell. Besides, shouldn't be me doin' this]

Kicking the soil with his foot, Garfiel declared this with a click of his tongue. He didn't seem to be joking around or anything, so apparently it was a fact that he could not enter. As to what would happen if he violated the agreement— that was not a question he could ask in front of Emilia, considering how important promises were to her.

Anyways, now that the situation was blocked in every direction. Letting Emilia go alone was out of the question, but the Garfiel-scouting-plan was dead. Then, in that case, there was only one choice remaining.

[Subaru: I'll go look for Otto so can you wait for a bit?]

[Emilia: Within the time you do something like that, the sun would go down— It's alright. I will go in]

Just as Subaru was trying to get another sacrifice, it was gently rejected by Emilia. As if her mind was now prepared, she glared at the entrance of the Tomb, while lights of vigilance gleamed within her violet pupils, wary of what might arise inside.

She too, judging from the sound of “Trials” and “The Tomb of a Witch”, must have guessed what unsettling things might be taking place within.

Carrying the same concerns and anxieties as she did, yet to lack even the strength to hold her hand, wouldn’t that be far too pathetic.

[Subaru: Ok just a bit inside…… no, just near the entrance, but I’ll just go in a little bit and check, how’s that……?]

[Garfiel: I think it’s better if ya don’t? Subaru ain’t got the qualifications. If ya go in without bein invited by the Witch’s Tomb, you’ll end up just like Roswaal]

[Subaru: Like Roswaal…… You mean that guy’s injuries, are because he went in there?]

As the image of Roswaal’s bandage-covered body resurfaced in his mind, Subaru tried to press back his astonishment as he looked up at Garfiel, who crossed his arms and nodded in confirmation,

[Garfiel: Well it won’t be like that for any unqualified dumbass that wanders in there at night. It’s only cus it was that guy, tha you got somethn like that. I wouldn’t be surprised if a normal guy without qualifications went in there and got ripped in half]

[Subaru: Those injuries weren’t inflicted by anyone, so that’s what he meant……]

Roswaal's roundabout statement finally made sense. When he said earlier that he wasn't wounded by anyone in particular, he had been referring to something like that.

But then, another question arose. Why did Roswaal enter the Tomb?

——That he himself was unqualified, he must have known that.

[Subaru: ……I better go check inside first after all]

Leaving the doubts about Roswaal for later, Subaru lowered his head as he made this conclusion.

Hearing his answer, for an instant Emilia and Garfiel looked stunned, before,

[Garfiel: Oy oy, were you listenin to me? It'd be dangerous if a dumbass without qualification goes in. Roswaal got like that at night time, but even if it's noon ya won't be much safer]

[Emilia: Yeah, it's dangerous, don't do it Subaru? If I go, it'd be alright. I was never thankful for it, but being a Half-Elf has its uses too, I guess, so……]

[Subaru: I'm glad you're worried about me, but]

Casting a gentle gaze on Emilia, who was tugging on the end of his sleeve, Subaru softly picked off the fingers which were holding onto him,

[Subaru: If we calm down and divide up our roles, isn't this the natural conclusion? Going inside is dangerous, that's the same for both of us. What we know so far just means that I might be in slightly more danger. So next we be should be looking at what each of us can do]

[Emilia: What we can do?]

[Subaru: If something bad happens inside, I won't be able to heal Emilia-tan. Unless Garfiel turns out to be that kind of insanely surprisingly guy, and happens to be an amazing healing magic user, then it'd be a different story]

[Garfiel: Wounds, mostly you can just rub spit on 'em and it'll be good, right?]

[Subaru: Judging from the suspect's testimony…… it's pretty much like that. Since either of us have the possibility of getting injured, I'd want to keep the healer Emilia-tan safe as an insurance]

Taking a sidelong glance at Garfiel, who had said those words proudly, Subaru tried to persuade Emilia.

Emilia seemed somewhat shaken by Subaru's argument, but, deciding that she could not give ground on the important part, continued with [But], shaking her head from side to side,

[Emilia: Major injuries…… or if it's a life-threatening wound, I won't be able to treat it. Puck isn't responding either, so there's a limit to what I can do. Roswaal has settled down now, but……]

[Subaru: Well, those wounds were pretty dangerous ones, huh. ……But still, try

to believe in the slipperiness of my survival skills. I think I rank pretty high on the resilience index of this world, you know?]

He smiled at Emilia, who was not letting go; only, this time, his reply did not sound like he was joking.

In fact, it's rare to find someone as bad at giving up as Subaru. If he were given an infinite number of chances to keep trying, no matter how many times it takes, he would probably keep trying.

No matter how many times his heart is broken, and crushed, he will keep struggling in search of the answer he was seeking.

Because that, is Natsuki Subaru's ——.

[Subaru: Then what if I make you a promise? Then you won't have to worry anymore. I promise, I will return to Emilia-tan's side, and I will never leave you]

[Emilia: ——ok]

Holding out his pinky finger, saying it almost teasingly, he received an unexpectedly favorable reply. Like the stunned Subaru, Emilia held out her pinky as well, and slightly tilted her head,

[Emilia: Um, what do you do with this finger?]

[Subaru: Eh? Uh, we tangle up each other's pinky fingers like…… Uuuoooouu, Emilia-tan's fingers are super thin and white and cute……!]

Their fingers tangling up, Subaru was moved by the unexpected contact. Then, following the violet pupils waiting for the next prompt, he quietly cleared his throat, and

[Subaru: Pin-ky-promise. Liar-turns-into-a-pin-cushion]

[Emilia: Pinky promise!]

Their pinky fingers separating at the same time, in this way, the promise between Subaru and Emilia was sealed.

This time, it was a promise made upon an understanding of how heavy promises were to Emilia. It was no longer possible to treat them like he did before, when he had taken them so carelessly.

[Subaru: So, I'll just take a quick look inside. Basically, I'll keep calling out while I'm looking around, so make sure to keep calling back to me from the outside so I don't get too lonely]

[Garfiel: Son of'a… sometimes I can't tell if yer a badass or a wimp]

[Subaru: I'm a rather careful person. But in the end, I'm breaking Ram's advice after all……]

Muttering the second half of that sentence in his mouth, Subaru apologised to the girl with peach-colored hair in his heart.

The deranged will of a Witch — what she had said was a disturbing term, and one he did not want Emilia to hear. Because surely, she would insist on going in by herself, with an even firmer attitude.

[Emilia: Subaru. If you feel there's something dangerous, you have to come back right away]

Emilia held her hands in front of her chest, and saw Subaru off with a worried gaze.

And in return, Subaru shot her an original thumbs-up with his pinky finger raised, sparkled his teeth in a smile, and took his step forward — turning toward the Tomb.

Crossing over the ivy under his legs, he concentrated his sight on the absolute darkness that lay several meters beyond the entrance. The Grave was filled with silence, and for now, there seemed to be no sign of begrudging voices, or atrocious creatures lying in ambush.

Still, on the other side of that darkness, what could be awaiting him, was truly, in every sense, unknown.

[Subaru: Ee~h, screw it. "If you don't venture into the tiger's den, you won't get the tiger's cub", right? Not that I need a baby tiger or anything!]

As a mofumofu fur-enthusiast, he did have the desire to pet a baby tiger one day, but it was not something he would take any risks over.

Anyways, Subaru, apparently influenced by Garfiel, cheered himself up with an

idiom, and making up his mind, he stepped inside the Tomb.

And, the moment he stepped onto the cold surface inside——,

[Subaru: ——eh?]

There was a mysterious feeling under his foot.

Astounded, Subaru looked down and lost his words. ——The floor, had disappeared.

[Subaru: Wa, wait…… That's just way too……]

——early for the FLAG to be recalled.

The footing he had expected to step on did not exist, and there was not a single thing to support his body as he tilted forward. The hand which he quickly extended out could touch neither the wall nor the floor, and so, Subaru's body was sucked into the darkness beneath his eyes ——.

[Subaru: aaaaaaaaaAAAAAH——!?]

Deeper and deeper, he fell through the endless abyss.

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—— Then, it was around 10 minutes after waking up at the bottom of the

abyss.

Walking around in the middle of a seemingly neverending darkness, at the end of his path, Subaru found himself in front of a lonely girl.

Now, in answer to her questions, Subaru told her everything that lead up to here.

[Subaru: So that's how, falling down after all sorts of things happened, and then walking around feeling hopeless and a little hungry, I stumbled into you. …… Satisfied?]

[Echidona: En, satisfied indeed. It seems you are a person who's even surpassed my expectations]

Covering her mouth with the back of her hand, the girl let out a quiet laugh that sounded like "ku ku ku" as she noticed Subaru watching her with a guarded look.

Sizzling energy was building up in his legs as if he was readying himself to dash out at any moment, and he opened and closed his hands as if preparing to seize her.

But naturally, Subaru's clumsy assault plan was…

[Echidona: There's no reason to be so cautious. And besides, surely you yourself can tell how little of a chance you have if you go up against me? Bravery and a fool's courage are easily mistaken for one another, and yet are quite different things]

[Subaru: Sorry, admitting defeat doesn't really suit my personality. And when you say there's no need to be so cautious…… considering I'm standing in front of a person who calls herself the Witch of Greed, is it even possible to follow that advice?]

[Echidona: I see. You really are as you say. It was my bad]

As she received Subaru's agitated reply full of rebellion, the girl —— the one named Echidona, did not alter her attitude. Rather, with tremendous ease, or perhaps finding the powerless Subaru's dogged attitude amusing, her own attitude was one which transcended even the shifting of dimensions.

Almost like reading a Manga, it was as if she was looking down on a sketched out character with eyes of a completely different dimension. To her, Subaru had never even been standing on the same stage as herself in the first place.

It was precisely because of this, that Subaru regarded her with the greatest caution.

A person emitting an oppressive aura that surpassed even that of the White Whale. The one going by the name of the "Witch of Greed". To what extent was all this real, was an irrelevant question. What was relevant, was that she was a person who was not to be taken lightly, whose overwhelming existence could be recognized even by the likes of Subaru.

However, as cold sweat emerged all over Subaru's forehead, she sent him a playful glance,

[Echidona: Alas, to be treated so cruelly really hurts my feelings. As you can see, I am only a meek and gentle girl, you know? If a boy looks at me with those eyes, it's not like I wouldn't get any ideas]

[Subaru: You aren't talking about the girl who's got "DEATH FLAG" written in big red letters on it, are you? Just so you know, ever since I got here, my caution sensor's been acting up like crazy]

After having tasted "death" so many times since coming to this world, Subaru had acquired some sort of an ability. Even though his deaths are still piling up in spite of this ability, his constant desire to avoid that experience again is forcing Subaru to incorporate more and more vigilance into his consciousness.

And according to that, the level of danger this girl posed was no less than when he was standing in front of Petelgeuse.

Although,

[Echidona: It seems we won't be able to talk properly this way. It can't be helped. ——In that case, how about this arrangement?]

Saying this, Echidona softly raised her right hand in front of her face. Subaru gulped down a breath at this gesture, and immediately after, the girl snapped her fingers with her raised hand.

A faint sound rang out —— and the world transformed before Subaru's eyes.

The cold stone space of the bottom of a crypt vanished, and panning out in its place was a prairie of green grass swept by the wind. ——And, on top of a small

hill,

[Subaru: Wha——!?]

[Echidona: Instead of playing in a place like that, how about here?]

Laughing at Subaru's amazement as he looked all around, on top of the hill, Echidona —— sitting in one of the chairs surrounding a white table, showed Subaru a seat opposite her own, and pleaded for him to come.

With no idea what just happened, Subaru hesitated as he came up to her. Neatly placed on the table were steaming cups of tea.

Seeing Subaru staring at her silently,

[Echidona: Don't worry, there's nothing dangerous inside. I could take a first sip if you like? Although, if you suspect whether a Witch can't be poisoned, then it wouldn't prove a thing]

[Subaru: ……I'm beat. Since coming in here, all my common sense just keeps getting overturned. What happened just now? You could use Spatial-Transition magic as well?]

Before this, Subaru's experience of Spatial-Transition magic had been at the hands of Beatrice.

With her hands, she had thrown Subaru out of the Forbidden Library and launched him all the way into a livestock barn in Arlam village. ***This happened

right after Beatrice threw him out in the Arc 4 Chapter 3 Prelude: Arc 3 Ch71 [The Girl In The Forbidden Library] excerpt – TC

According to Julius, this magic was a lost art, but if the person in front of his eyes was a Witch, then it would not be such a surprising thing.

[Echidona: Spatial-transition…… oh, the Dark magic. No, this is your misunderstanding. That magic has a lot of disadvantages. I'm not fond of it so it's not something I'd use. This now was just a small trick. I have some degree of freedom here. Because this is my Citadel, after all]

[Subaru: Your, Citadel……?]

Furrowing his brows at Echidona's words, Subaru looked all around once again.

The wind-swept grasslands seemed to be endless, and in all directions there appeared to be nothing beyond the horizons. In reality, whether this empty landscape actually existed was another matter, but it was truly a fantastical sight.

Noticing this, Subaru gulped down his saliva and then shrugged his shoulders with a smile on his face,

[Subaru: Unfortunately, I can't see a Castle or even a hut anywhere. What, is your Citadel being rebuilt right now or something? Or did they repossess everything except your table and chairs because you can't pay back the loan?]

[Echidona: Fffhaha. You really are funny. In front of me, there are very few

people who could throw such impudent retorts, except other Witches like myself. Surely, after my death, I never thought there would be an increment in that number]

As if the number of times Echidona could remember herself laughing at a joke was something that could be counted on one's fingers, adding Subaru to that list seemed to bring her great joy.

But on the other hand, Subaru's face loured as he caught a phrase which could not be missed from her words. Just now, she surely said this. That it was "after my death".

[Subaru: If it is true that you are the Witch of Greed, then you should be dead if I remember correctly. I came here to visit your grave, after all]

[Echidona: Oh in that case I sincerely thank you. If you wish to bring me some flowers then please place it near the entrance. I am a person who is not fond of alcohol, so if you want to make an offering then something sweet would be appreciated]

[Subaru: So there's a culture of offering in this world too, huh…… Sorry, but I didn't bring any local produce and I forgot to buy the flowers. Please be satisfied with my smile]

It was a smile of flowers blooming in profusion— the poisonous types of flowers, though.

As Subaru was showcasing that, Echidona purred pleasantly. She then brought the cup resting on the table to her lips, and, taking a sip, she went on,

[Echidona: I've never had a chance to drink tea so happily even when I was alive. Just as I thought, there are things to look forward to even after death. New discoveries are inexhaustible]

[Subaru: You know, this conversation between you and me being a thing in itself is already really weird. ……Damnit, I'll drink it. I'll just drink it!]

Acting so cautious and on edge in front of a person who had no guard up started making him feel stupid, so Subaru, as if plundering it, snatched the cup from the table and gulped down its contents in a rush.

It was neither water, nor tea, nor black tea, but had an inconceivable taste. It was not unpleasant, though.

[Echidona: Drinking up something a Witch gave you, you must be quite courageous]

[Subaru: Hah. Having come all the way here, how can I be frightened now. First of all, if you wanted to kill me then in the next panel I would have already been in cinders. So I shouldn't be so cautious about a cup of tea]

Swinging his hand, he placed the emptied cup down on the table with [Thanks for the treat], and continued,

[Subaru: It was neither good or bad but, what kind of tea was this?]

[Echidona: Considering it was something formed out of my Citadel. If I put it

into words, it’d be my bodily fluid]

[Subaru: What the hell did you make me drink!?]

Subaru jumped up knocking his chair away, and struggled to vomit out the liquid he just drank. But, she only softly giggled “kkuku” at Subaru’s dramatic overreaction

[Echidona: That was unexpected. I didn’t think my appearance was that bad]

[Subaru: However much it may be the body fluids of a beautiful girl, I don’t want to drink it without being prepared first! And even if I was prepared I don’t want to drink anything described as bodily fluids! I have normal fetishes, you know!?]

He had no property of being excited by saliva or sweat, at least he thought.

Although if that was Emilia’s or Rem’s, he thought it might not be too bad, but he quietly hid that in his heart, and went on,

[Subaru: Crap, I can’t vomit this out. ——Hey, this isn’t bad for my body or anything right?]

[Echidona: Don’t worry. It is easily absorbed by the body without obstructions. It is bodily fluid, after all]

[Subaru: You aren’t really saying something good, stop doing that face!]

Seeing Echidona's slightly bragging attitude, Subaru winced. And Echidona, to whom Subaru was voicing his vehement objection, only tilted her cup with a refreshing expression, and went on [Anyways],

[Echidona: You really are an intriguing character. The fact that you are standing in front of me normally is proof of that]

[Subaru: What, you're too much of a beautiful girl so normally other people's eyes collapse when they see you or something? I'll say this first, I feed my eyes on who I consider to be the most beautiful girls on a regular basis. So even looking at you I don't have many opportunities to think of you as a that cute of a girl]

[Echidona: No, when normal people stand in front of me they vomit. It's funny, right?]

[Subaru: What's so funny about that!?]

Right from the beginning of their conversation, there had been nothing but unsettling words popping out. Subaru took another look at the girl sitting in the chair,

Her hair and her entire body were white like snow. Her black clothes looked almost like she was in mourning dress, and a remaining hint of youthfulness gave her beauty a color of bewitching glamour. He mused in his thoughts about how a beautiful woman in funerary clothes could have a certain magical charm, but her never-disappearing aura of oppressiveness kept making him regard her existence as a menace.

[Echidona: So——]

Then, looking up at Subaru whose vigilance had not dissipated, she placed her emptied cup on the table as well, and, tracing her finger on the edge, she went on,

[Echidona: Talking on like this would be a refreshing pleasure for me but ……it wouldn't be so for you, would it? I think there must be something you want to say, or want to ask, isn't there?]

[Subaru: ……Yeah there is. That's right! Being swallowed by the atmosphere I had completely forgotten, but that's right. You are …… no, actually before that, where the heck is this? Is this really inside the Tomb?]

For Subaru, this was connected to the place he fell into not long after he stepped into the Tomb.

He would have readily believed that the gloomy place from before was the bottom of the Tomb. But now, having been invited to a prairie like this, even that felt doubtful.

To that question from Subaru, Echidona softly stroked her own white hair with her hands, and,

[Echidona: That question was half correct and half incorrect. Your body is surely inside the Tomb, but your mind is in my Citadel. To put it into words, this is inside a dream]

[Subaru: A dream……? But, I don't remember your face so much to see you in a

dream]

[Echidona: You are inside a dream, I could say, but it does not have to be inside your dream. This is my Citadel——so, it is inside my dreams. A space similar to this one… don't you know it?]

To Echidona's pursuit, Subaru held his breath. He then slightly shook his head,

[Subaru: Wha, what is your basis for saying something like that……]

[Echidona: I have no assured proof. But, somehow or another, I just felt it. Your attitude looks away from something you know; I just felt like that your's resembles the behavior of a person like that]

[Subaru: ……It's true, that I don't know. But, what you're saying is not wrong either]

It was not a severe way of putting it, but to Subaru, it felt like her words were an impeachment.

Echidona's words were not mistaken, but Subaru's reply was no lie either.

When he was told that he was inside a dream, Subaru, while he was surprised, also comprehended it easily. It was as if this feeling was well-known and understood by his heart already.

Why it felt like that —— he could not find the reason even searching through all his memories, though,

[Subaru: I'll accept that this is inside your dreams for now. So then, how do I get out of here?]

[Echidona: To wake from a dream, one either wishes to wake up, or is woken up externally. However, even if someone tries to wake me from the outside, my body is no longer present, and it is quite difficult to wake yourself from someone else's dream. So, you can't wake up until I feel like letting you go, and decide to wake up, I think]

[Subaru: ——! Then, are you actually……]

Subaru shivered at Echidona's simple words.

Her Citadel, the meaning of that word now carried a shape of vivid reality. Subaru's captured soul was now in her palms. The deranged wills of a Witch which Ram had spoken of—— the truth of those words swelled in his mind.

[Subaru: Not planning on letting me leave……?]

Even though he was exercising the greatest caution, he was throwing words which may enter him into a fatal rift with the Witch. The fact that if she revealed her true nature he would have no chance against her was well understood.

And then, to the question by Subaru, she spilled out a small sigh,

[Echidona: No, not really. I will let you go if you want to go back, you know? I was not the one who called you here, it was you who came by yourself, after all]

[Subaru: What are you doing to my nervousness? ‘Mr.Serious’ is not breathing, you know?]

[Echidona: Mr.Serious, unlike you, is not standing in front of me. Maybe he’s vomiting under the shade of a tree somewhere?]

In front of Echidona’s smoothly spewed venom, Subaru felt sapped of all his strength. In the end, what was she trying to do by coming into contact with him?

It had only been a short time, but even after their conversation he had no grasp of her character at all. Although, for a person referred to as a Witch, it was not surprising that it would not be possible to understand her so easily.

[Subaru: Anyways, then please let me go if you can let me go. There’s probably a girl who’s waiting and getting worried about me. If I had the time to drink your body fluids, I’d rather go back to that girl so she won’t be so worried]

[Echidona: That’s fine with me, but is it fine with you?]

[Subaru: Fine with what?]

[Echidona: To go back when you are right in front of me, that is. ——An opportunity to have a conversation with the Witch of Greed, it’s not something that people other than yourself could get even if they tried]

This being said, it was the first time that Subaru understood the meaning of her words and taken them into his focus.

Yes. It was. He had only been focused on her menace so far, but had overlooked the most important thing. If she was the Witch of Greed, if she was really the existence which had borne this name in life, then,

[Subaru: You……know the answers to, the things I want to know?]

[Echidona: You are asking me, for the whereabouts of knowledge ——are you?]

In response to Subaru's wrenched out words, once again Echidona laughed with "ku ku ku…". Laughing, this laughter which felt like it was her happiest yet, inflicted the sense of oppression upon Subaru more strongly than ever before.

The atmosphere distorted, and the ambiance of the endless grasslands suddenly began to collapse. The sky cracked, the prairie burned up, and the world beyond the horizons started to decay.

Feeling a non-existent tremble, Subaru hastily stretched out his hands toward the surely existing table. But the moment he touched it, it scattered as if changing into sand. Then,

[Echidona: Just as I thought, you are an amusing being]

Lifting her face, the scenery around Echidona deteriorated, and a bizarre pattern started to cover over the world. A shadow was expanding, extending out arms and legs that stuck and clung onto Subaru's entire body.

In revulsion, he tried to desperately escape, but the collapse of the world had already spread very close to the two of them. The scaffold for escape did not exist. And just so, the world gradually lost out,

[Echidona: If you want to exchange questions and answers, then this space is plenty enough. To know what you want to know. Your desire for such a thing——or rather your Greed, I do approve of it]

What remained between them, was just the space between the chairs in which they were seated. It was a distance close enough to touch if he only stretched out his arm, a world in which they shall sit upon their chairs and have their talk.

The world outside of this had already disappeared. The bottom of the darkness to which his footing had been lost seemed to have no end. Probably without a joke, it would not be possible to come back if he were to fall.

As a chill ran down Subaru's spine, seated on her chair, Echidona seemed to be in a good mood.

She clapped her hands, and gazed into Subaru with her shining eyes,

[Echidona: Come now, what would you like to hear about? If it is anything I know, then I would answer to anything. Is it about the "Witch of Gluttony" Daphné, who had created beasts differing from God, to save the world from hunger? Is it about the "Witch of Lust" Carmilla, who had granted emotion even to those who are not human, to fill the world with love? Is it about the "Witch of Wrath" Minerva, who punched and healed every person, out of grief for the world filled with conflicts? Is it about the "Witch of Sloth" Sekhmet, who drove the Dragon away, beyond the Great Falls, just to bring peace? Is it about the "Witch of Pride" Typhon, who kept on judging the guilty with the innocence and

ruthlessness of her youth?]

They sounded unfamiliar —— or rather, they were the enumeration of a history which should no longer be existing in the current world.

Instilled with the massive amount of information, Subaru could not utter a sound. In front of him, Echidona was still laughing.

[Echidona: Is it about the “Witch of Greed” Echidona, the Incarnation of the Thirst for Knowledge, who remain with her regrets in the world after death, to seek any and every wisdom in the world?]

Pointing to herself with a finger, she said as if with self-ridicule, and went on with [Or…],

[Echidona: The Witch of Envy, who destroyed all of these Witches and made them her food, and turned the rest of the world into her enemy —— is it about her?]

Chapter 11 [Prideful Slothful Wrath]

In the space where even his footing was uncertain, before an emptiness where falling meant inevitable death, there was nothing to distract his attention away from there.

For in this moment, the only subject occupying Subaru's consciousness was the girl in front of his eyes —— the Witch with white-hair and white-skin, black clothes and black eyes.

That sense of overwhelming presence, of menace, that transcendent entity was of an entirely different level than all other living things.

All of Subaru's insignificant existence, his eyes, his heart, and his soul, were being toyed and tangled upon the tips of those unseen fingers.

In the face of truly inescapable horror, people often seal-in emotions such as these.

Unable to breathe. Unable feel his own heartbeat. Not even the breaking of a cold sweat, or even a blink, could proceed without her permission. There, was absolute isolation.

[Echidona: Oh dear, I may have overdone it with the intimidation. Even back then, whenever I take an interest in something, I'd end up running my mouth too much. A Witch's nature is a troublesome thing]

Suddenly, still seated in her chair, Echidona seemed to notice how her speech

had overheated and took up some self reflection. But still, he could not recover from the traumatizing darkness emanating from the Witch in front of his eyes.

No, the sense of oppression he had intentionally ignored up to now, now that he truly recognized it, would not leave his mind again.

The friendly exchange between them had evaporated. Subaru could no longer see the girl in front of his eyes as a girl anymore. For her true nature was that of a Witch.

[Echidona: When I was alive, this sort of thing happens every once in awhile. It was just like this when the royalty of the various nations came to me, seeking to borrow my wisdom……But I suppose you can no longer look at me without being guarded now]

“My my”, shaking her head as if trying to say, Echidona gazed into Subaru with her black pupils. Shaken by the sight of his own expressionless reflection in the black of her eyes, Subaru wavered, and just the same moment, she smiled.

[Echidona: In that case, maybe you’ll like this idea?]

[Subaru: ————eh!?]

An abrupt change came.

Smiling, she whispered something to Subaru as he furrowed his brows to show his non-understanding. Then, watching as her smile dissolve into the darkness, Subaru gasped, and the moment he blinked——

[Little Girl: Whatcha lo~okin at~?]

[Subaru: ……haa?]

[Little Girl: Well stop sta~ring at me~]

Swinging her legs around as she said this, the little girl sitting in front of Subaru puffed up her cheeks in a pout.

With dark-green hair coming down to her shoulders, it was a little girl with apple-red cheeks. Her hazel-colored skin in her white one-piece dress matched adorably, and her childish cuteness unreservedly scattered everywhere around her. And, particularly distinctive, there was a blue flower-shaped hair clip on her hair.

No matter how you look at it, it was a harmless, innocent little girl——now sitting in the place where Echidona had just been, staring back at Subaru.

[Subaru: Ah, eh, huh? W-wait. E-Echidona……? Where the hell did she go?]

[Little Girl: Dona? Dona must somewhere around here but~ , who are you supposed to be~?]

[Subaru: M-me? My name's Natsuki Subaru. I wasn't invited here or anything, I'm just someone who got lost, drank some tea, and was heading back…… but then the owner of the house suddenly disappeared which left me in a pretty difficult situation……]

[Little Girl: Ehh~. Then~, I'll call you Baru~]

It’s hard to feel hostility toward something so cute, and even though it didn’t quite fit the situation, Subaru gave this frank self-introduction. Hearing this, the little girl smiled happily, which made Subaru’s heart all warm inside despite the circumstances.

Regardless of how messed up things had become, the moment Echidona disappeared it was as if the pressure had been released. If he calmly considers all this, perhaps the little girl before his eyes was just like him, having been kidnapped from who knows where.

One way or another, maybe now he’d be able to escape with this little girl’s help——even though he wasn’t too sure how much strength she could lend him. He raised up his face and,

[Subaru: Ok, anyways let’s think of a plan to get out of here while the big bad ghost isn’t home. But considering there’s not many places to step on… first, maybe just tell me your name, little missy……]

[Little Girl: Say, Baru~, are you a bad man~?]

[Subaru: if you could tell me that then at least……Wha?]

Reaching out his hand, intending to sparkle his teeth, Subaru furrowed his brows.

The little girl in front of him swung her legs, which weren’t long enough to reach floor, and she rocked back and forth in her chair while childishly muttering [Be~cau~se~] impatiently pursing up her lips,

[Little Girl: I’m asking~ are you a bad man, or not a bad man~. So are you~?]

[Subaru: By their very nature, all humans are creatures who sacrifice other things to survive. Therefore, perhaps from the moment we are born into this world, we are sinners. But, even so, we still live our lives. Knowing that even as we are sacrificing, something more valuable can be built upon that sacrifice…… Even though I think this kind of philosophical discussion isn't really something a little girl can understand, is that what you mean?]

[Little Girl: Um~, I heard it but I don't really understand~. Well~, ok~, if I just check~]

Toward Subaru, who looked confused, the little girl looked even more confused.

Saying this, she held tight onto Subaru's extended hand. From the small palm completely wrapped up inside Subaru's, he felt a tactile softness that was unique to the hand of a little girl. And feeling this gave him a renewed resolve, that no matter happens, he will bring her safely out of this place.

[Subaru: Even though I've been around Petra, I'm still surprised I'm so fond of kids. I used to think they're too noisy and all but……]

[Little girl: ——onlythroughpainandsufferingcantheguiltyberedeemed]

[Subaru: Hah?]

Suddenly, the little girl quickly muttered something in a whisper.

Unable to understand, Subaru's raised up one of his brows, and felt a light impact. As if his arm had been lightly tugged, there was then a strangely liberating sensation, as if being released from a heavy burden.

Wondering what had happened, Subaru turned his head to look all around

him.

Everything was just like it was before, and nothing changed in the world. The space that permitted Subaru and the little girl to sit facing each other was still without wind or sound or sensation of any kind.

Sitting in the chair in front of him, was still only the little girl swinging her legs.

Only, in her hand, she was holding a man's severed arm——

[Subaru: ——!?]

[Little Girl: Doesn't hurt so~, you're not a bad man~, I'm so relieved~]

Noticing the abnormal turn of events, Subaru looked at his own right arm——at the right side of his body where is arm should be, he saw the reality of the exposed cross-section of his shoulder where his arm had been twisted off.

Pain, blood, none of it was there before he noticed it. The bone and arteries wrapped in pink meat all exposed in the cross section reminded him of the edible meat lined up in a butcher's shop.

That is, aside from the unacceptable surreal reality that it was happening to his own right shoulder.

[Subaru: Oo, aaaAAAAAA!!!! A-arm……my arm aaaAAA!?]

[Little Girl: It doesn't hurt right~, don't yell so loud~. If you flail around too much we won't be able to put it back~]

[Subaru: Y-yo-youu!? Ripping someone's arm off, what, what the hell are you saying! G-give it back! Give it back!]

Holding the exposed cross-section of his right arm shrieking, Subaru jumped right at the snorting little girl with a demon-possessed look on his face. Yanking his right arm back from her hands, he hurriedly tried to stick it back on.

Not that a severed arm can be reattached by sticking it on, but such a thing didn't really occur to Subaru at this moment.

But,

[Little Girl:——nosinfulmisdeedshallescaperighteousjudgement]

The moment he heard something being uttered from the little girl's mouth, Subaru's posture collapsed. Rather, more accurately, the legs that were supposed to step onto the floor shattered like fine glass-craft from the knee downward.

Losing his right arm and both his knees, Subaru's body fell forward from the momentum. And receiving him, was the lap of the little girl still sitting in her chair.

The little girl gently received the falling Subaru, and like a mother holding her beloved child, she caressed the terrified Subaru in her arms.

[Little Girl: You aren't a bad man at all~, but you still think of yourself as a sinner. You are a gentle~ and good child~. Poor~ thing~, you must~ be in pain~]

[Subaru: J-just…….w-wha what……a-are you……]

His right shoulder and his shattered legs did not bring him pain. Nor were they bleeding.

Incomprehensible. An unacceptable existence. The existence of the little girl before him, the one a moment ago he had thought was a subject of protection, was now despairingly distant from that impression.

Hearing Subaru's question, the little girl tilted her head,

[Typhon: Typhon is the "Witch of Pride" you know~]

[Subaru: Pri……!?]

The impactful statement once again stopped Subaru's thoughts in their tracks.

Be it anger or horror, these concepts were completely blown away.

Just a moment ago, Subaru had been in front of the Witch of Greed Echidona. Then why was he now suddenly faced with the Witch of Pride?

Witches who should have already been annihilated, and died long ago——,

[Woman: ——Huuu. Guess it's my turn. Haaa, can't get out of it]

A languid voice came from above him, while Subaru's petrified throat was still trying its best to groan.

Subaru had only blinked his eyes. The color of the world did not change, and his arm and his legs are still missing. But even so,、

[Woman: Haaa, so heavy. Shouldn't you be a bit lighter without the arm and legs? Huuu, that's a man for you…… man or woman, wouldn't existence itself be better off as one big useless blob?]

The one Subaru's body was leaning against had changed from the little girl named Typhon to a different woman entirely.

The woman this time had strange magenta-colored hair: a beautiful girl with a lazy impression. Her skin and lips were sickly pale. Her downcast, half-closed eyes gave off a sleepy or, rather, generally unenergetic impression, and, as if even breathing was a chore, a depressing atmosphere loured around her

And although she was wearing loose black robes, obvious stains and rips littered all across the fabric as if birds had walked all over it.

Looking down at the silent Subaru, she sighed lethargically.

[Woman: Haaa, you're pretty unlucky too. Being played around by Echidona, then Typhon and me……Huuu, meeting three Witches one after another, haa, only that dummy Flugel or that stick-swinging Reid have done something like that before]

[Subaru: You're, a Witch……as well? Just like the little girl just now, and Echidona……]

[Sekhmet: Haa, I'm Sekhmet. Huuu, it's such a bother but you could call me the Witch of Sloth, or not if you don't want. Haa, not that I'm asking you to call me one way or another it's so confusing anyway. Huuuu, I get tired from talking so can I just stay quiet from now on?]

[Subaru: Oh give me a break. I'm gonna lose my mind here. If no one tells me soon, I can't even be sure of my own reality anymore. Please, just tell me what's going on right now]

Subaru used his only surviving left hand to grab hold of her robe, and raised up his head to look at Sekhmet. Sekhmet seemed to find that gaze a bit bothersome, and sighed, then turned down her eyes same as before,

[Sekhmet: Your right arm, haaa, and your knees are gone. Huuu, it was Typhon wasn't it? It's because that child doesn't understand other people's pain. Haaa, she's still that innocent and merciless child like before. Huu, the poor child. Haaaa]

[Subaru: My, arm and legs……th-they can grow back right?]

[Sekhmet: Huuu, for me that's really…… aaa, but that's alright, haa. It's pretty bothersome for me too, huu, I'll leave it for the child after me and go back to sleep. Haaa breathing's such a bother. If I could take in a lifetime's worth of air all into the lungs at once, then I won't have to breathe again for the rest of my life, don't you think? Haaa]

[Subaru: If you do that your lungs will explode and we'll die right? But compared to that, my situation here……]

Still in her languid demeanor, Sekhmet's off-beat proposition puffed Subaru's head full of smoke. As if trying to say "please take this seriously", Subaru tried to plead to her.

[Girl: ——Just now, did you say you wanted to die in front of me?]

He heard a murderous voice saying.

At this point, although it's no longer the first time Subaru had been surprised

today, he still couldn't react with anything other than being stunned stiff.

Again, the person in front of his eyes changed. The Witch flaunting the full, dense head of hair had disappeared, and replacing her was,

[Subaru: ……Breasts?]

[Girl: ——Tch! W-where are you staring at, where!]

Trying to look up from the soft lap at the other person's face, Subaru's vision was blocked by large protruding breasts that were obscuring her face.

The sensation of the lap that was bearing the weight of his body, unlike Typhon's and Sekhmet's, now had a meatier feel to it, and honestly seemed to be full of the dynamism of a feminine body.

While literally experiencing this with his entire body, Subaru was suddenly lifted up by its owner's arm. ——with a single hand, Subaru's body had been easily hoisted up, even though his weight was still no less than an average adult woman's, even after losing his arm and both his legs.

[Girl: Look at the other person's eyes when you're addressing them, eyes! Really, men are alway like this, unbelievable!]

Saying this as her anger was puffing out, it was a beautiful girl with swaying golden hair. Starting with a short skirt, she was wearing loosely fitting clothes over her body, and her stature while sitting down seemed on the short side. But even so, her large breast gave her a full-bodied impression, and gave the whole situation a somewhat titillating atmosphere… well, only the totally healthy kind, of course.

Then, glaring at the hoisted-up Subaru with rage-filled eyes, she brushed aside her hair in front of the frightened Subaru,

[Girl: Missing your right arm. Missing your legs from the knees down. Not bleeding or in pain…… looks like you've been punished by Typhon! That child…… she did something so inconsiderate again, it's just going too far!]

Looking at Subaru's painless wounds, her blue eyes were clouded over by intense emotions.

With impulsive words, and an indignant attitude, her every act was instilled with passion, and all the while she was behaving like this, there were tears pooling faintly in her eyes.

[Subaru: A-are you crying……?]

[Girl: Not crying! Just angry! That's right, I'm just angry! At Typhon who caused all these wounds and just left you here! At the world that made that child do such an outrageous thing! And at all the people fighting and harming one another making this world hell, at the senselessness of it all!]

Her furious voice cried out, with such power that it messed up her hair as she pronounced this.

Then, lifting up her arm, she suddenly tossed the dangling Subaru up into the air.

[Subaru: eh?]

[Girl: So I absolutely will not permit it! Pain! Conflict! Wounds! How can I remain idle in front such things——!!]

The next moment, with a speed that broke the wind, the girl dashed out and struck her fist straight into Subaru. His face being suddenly injected with such incredible speed and power, Subaru's body was quite literally blown away like a leaf. But,

[Subaru: Pffu——!?]

Expecting to continue being blown away for quite some time, he suddenly arrived at the end of the world.

Echidona had actually trapped Subaru within a world of limited space, so after being launched flying by the power-packed punch, he had only managed to fly for a short distance. The impact against the invisible wall rolling through his entire body, having gone splat in the middle of the air, Subaru turned is eyes back around. And there,

[Girl: ——All will be well! Don't ever think of turning back!]

Leaping, as if in pursuit, the girl rained punches onto Subaru's body while it was still in the middle of its falling animation-sequence.

The endless flurry of punches striking into every inch of his body, Subaru's flesh was sandwiched between the wall and her fists. The sounds of impacts ceaselessly penetrating Subaru's body, its power went through him and into the walls, and began shaking the very world to its core.

Kneaded by the impacts, knocked up and down left and right, Subaru could no longer tell which was which as his mind turned blank. In the field of his vision, through the dance of the incoming fists, perhaps no longer wishing to conceal it, there was the face of the girl covered in a flood of tears. Droplets glimmering as they scattered through the air, just when Subaru wanted to complain "I'm the

one who should be crying here…”, his face was already turned away by a punch.

Not knowing when the incessant hell would end—— it suddenly ended unexpectedly.

[Girl: Let my fists revive the world! Let my anger cleanse the world! My Wrath, and my healing fists are my reply——!]

The next moment, the world shattered.

The wall that Subaru had been stuck onto, under the impacts of the girl’s rain of fists—— after sensing an unbearable sensation through his clothes, Subaru felt the wall behind him shatter into dust.

In that instant, Subaru felt a sense of liberation.

When the rain of fists stopped, he felt something soft. Subaru noticed that he was lying on the ground, in the grassland of the previous world where they had their tea.

Sitting himself up, he looked all around in a stupor. Landing gallanty beside him, the girl brushed her blonde hair as she shot Subaru a stare.

[Girl: Right arm!]

[Subaru: Eh!? O-ok!]

Being suddenly called, Subaru raised up his arm, and that’s when he noticed.

The arm that had been ripped off of his shoulders was now back and perfectly well, all the way to his fingertips.

[Girl: Legs!]

[Subaru: Oooo things are looking up. I can stand and walk! Look I can do a moonwalk now!]

Just to be sure, Subaru jumped up and started doing a moonwalk for good measure. Watching Subaru sliding across the grass, the girl held her elbow and nodded contently. And it was at that moment, when the swaying of her prominent bust burned itself into his memory.

[Subaru: Y-you saved me, thank you. But, considering the flow of things, you are……?]

[Minerva: I am the “Witch of Wrath” Minerva! Not that I call myself that!]

[Subaru: You called yourself that just now!]

[Minerva: Don’t, that was no big deal! I will not allow anyone to be hurt in front of my eyes, nor tolerate to see a person wounded! It’s not a deed to be passed on for posterity or anything!]

[Subaru: You’ve totally just marked your own actions as some incredible accomplishment there! You’re not really hearing what other people are saying are you? It’s really hard to communicate with someone like that!]

Flailing his only recently-healed arms around to demonstrate his befuddlement, seeing this, Minerva just quickly turned her back to him.

[Minerva: In any case, now that the wounds are healed, there is nothing more

for me to do here! Don’t get so much as a bug bite now! That’s a promise with a Witch!]

[Subaru: Even if I go live in a sterilized room that’s not possible is it!? And don’t make promises on behalf of other people! Promise with a Witch or something, wouldn’t breaking it mean some severe punishment!?]

[Minerva: It’s no such thing. But if it ever comes to that……I will heal everyone]

[Subaru: Don’t say that like you’re going to go around murdering everyone, it’s really scary!]

But the fact remains, Subaru’s body was completely healed.

Her crude healing methods——in this case, true to the description, he actually was healed at the end of all that. Beating someone up in order to heal them, to think that a phenomenon so inconceivable could possibly exist… It’s almost like in those old tv-series.

[Minerva: ——Well]

Then, the girl who was gallantly walking away turned around.

Her white hair swinging with her motion, and her black dress spreading upward charmingly, all filled into Subaru’s eyes. She was tilting her head to the side, quite happily gazing back at him.

[Echidona: To prove that I’m relatively harmless, I let you meet some of the other Witches. So what do you think? If your attitude could warm up to me a bit now, then waking them up from their sleep would all be worth it]

Summing up his painful experience up to now, was the Witch Echidona.

Seeing her in front of him, Subaru drew in a deep, long breath, before lifting up his head,

[Subaru: You, really are every bit a Witch…… No human would think like that at all]

And, just uttering these words took up the last bit of his strength.

Credits

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